

INTROVERT ENTANGAMA



SAMUEL WRIGHT

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Dedication

For anyone who's ever felt unseen, unheard, or unworthy
May you find your people, your peace, and your place in this world.
And for those still fighting their quiet battles: This is for you.

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Forewarning

I'm not suicidal; life just gets to be too much sometimes. I genuinely want to live, but it's not always easy. It's this weird paradox: I want to live because maybe things will get better, but I also think about dying because things can get overwhelming. Most of the time, I keep going because there is a chance that things will improve. But there are days when it gets to be too much, and ending it just seems simpler.

I do want to live. This is proof. I'm writing it down, trying to untangle my thoughts. It's hard to put my thoughts into words perfectly, but here goes. I want to live. I also want to die sometimes. But mostly, I want to live because I believe things can change. The thought of dying lingers only because things still feel messy and unfair.

Maybe this makes more sense: my life feels like a fog-covered road. There's a bottomless cliff just off to the side. I'm walking forward, careful not to trip, hoping the fog lifts eventually. But sometimes, when my legs are tired, I stop. I stand there for a second, looking at the edge.

I've looked over that edge before. More than once, I've actually stepped closer than I should have. I'll talk about those moments later, not because they're easy to talk about, but because they're part of how I got here. And "here" is still walking. Still hoping the fog lifts.

But again, I do want to live.

If anyone finds this, don't freak out. This is just me trying to make sense of everything, as my therapist suggested. Years of carrying this around have left me with a strange comfort in knowing I could leave on my terms if it ever gets to be too much. I know that's not the

answer, but there's a kind of peace in imagining one perfect last day before stepping away.

But I'm not planning that day. I'm planning tomorrow. And the day after that.

Because, again, I want to live.

Samuel

How's that for a start?

Sorry if that was too heavy. I thought about sharing a story I wrote once about having eight alarm clocks (no roommate, long story), but it's unfinished. So instead, here's this piece from an old notebook. Perhaps it explains more about where my mind has been.

For context: one day, I called the National Suicide Hotline. They told me to try writing down my thoughts since I already enjoy telling stories. It helped. Sort of. I'm still figuring out how to say things perfectly.

Anyway, just so we're clear, I do want to live.

Okay. Enough of that. Here's something lighter:

I'm Samuel Wright, but my friends call me Sam. I'm from Virginia, my favorite color is forest green, and I'm left-handed. The story you're about to read is about my time in a job program in Washington, DC, the events, challenges, and questionable decisions that led me here, still trying to figure out what's next.

I'm okay. A lot has happened, and reflecting on it all might be helpful. Like piecing together a map of where I've been, so I can finally see where I'm going.

Why am I doing this? I'm not entirely sure. Maybe it's for people entering my life to give them a sense of who I am. Or for those re-entering, so they'll understand what's changed. Maybe it's for me to see the whole story laid out instead of just carrying the fragments. Maybe by the end, I'll have thought of a good enough reason for putting all this down. Something that makes sense of the journey.

Hopefully, I'll figure it out before the last page.

But first, let's jump ahead to therapy.

Chapter One

Present Day—

I know it's backwards to start with therapy before I tell you what I'm in therapy for, but trust me—you need to see this first.

The first time I walked into Dr. Dyer's office, I almost didn't make it past the door. It wasn't even a full session. Just a trial one. Half the time, he'd explained. Enough to get a feel for how this works before deciding if I wanted to continue. Or if I was even a good fit for continuing.

The crooked nameplate stopped me. Two degrees off-center. I stood there for seven minutes, staring at how it tilted, my brain cataloguing it, filing it away, adding it to the list of things that didn't sit right.

That's how most things felt back then: slightly wrong, but not wrong enough to warrant the effort of correction.

By the time I walked in for that trial session—the half-length one LEAP required before deciding whether to keep me—I managed to make it past the door without freezing.

The waiting area still had aggressively beige walls, chairs, and even the landscape prints looked chosen specifically to avoid evoking human emotion. The crooked clock above the receptionist's desk still jerked forward in uneven intervals, as if time itself wasn't sure it wanted to be there either. A small table held a stack of magazines that hadn't moved in weeks: *Discover Mindfulness*, *Master Work Life Balance* titles with curled corners from people who gave up mid-article.

Someone had tried to discover mindfulness and abandoned the mission halfway through. That felt about right.

The receptionist didn't look up when she spoke. "Samuel Wright?"

I nodded.

Her fingers tapped across her keyboard, eyes scanning the monitor. "Dr. Dyer will see you now."

The hallway was narrow, lined with framed posters about mental health. One offered "Simple Steps to Manage Anxiety" in cheerful bullet points, as if panic attacks could be reasoned with like a difficult coworker. Another showed a tree with deep roots, captioned: Growth takes time.

My brain used to calculate how long a tree that size would actually take to grow. By then, I just kept walking.

Dr. Dyer's office had become familiar. The muted navy walls. The bookshelf crammed with titles on psychology, trauma recovery, and self-improvement, none of them books I'd ever opened, though the spines still made my brain itch to alphabetize them. The Virginia Tech Hokie bobblehead on his desk wobbled slightly from the vent's draft, looking oddly out of place between a leather notebook and a neat stack of paperwork.

That bobblehead still made me smirk. It was more honest than the inspirational posters in the hallway, closer to how people actually work. A bobblehead doesn't pretend to have all the answers. It just keeps nodding until gravity stops it.

Dr. Dyer sat behind the desk, broad-shouldered with a dark mustache trimmed with military precision. He looked exactly how I'd imagined a therapist named Dr. Dyer might: the kind of man

whose expression didn't invite small talk but didn't shut it down either.

When he looked up, he gave me that same short nod he always did. Acknowledgment without expectation.

“Samuel.” He closed the folder in front of him, my folder, thicker by then than it had been when we started. “How are we doing today?”

I lowered myself into the chair across from him, letting myself sink into the cushion. Not quite comfortable, but not braced for escape either. “Better.”

He agreed. Didn't push. Just waited.

That's what I'd learned about Dr. Dyer over those months. He was good at waiting. Good at letting silence do the work until you fill it yourself.

I glanced at the bookshelf, then back at him. “You wanted to talk about the beginning today.”

“If you're ready.”

Was I? I wasn't sure. But I'd been thinking about it all week. About how to explain what happened. About where it all actually started.

“Before Sanctuary,” I said slowly. “Before the firing. Before everything fell apart and somehow came back together.”

Dr. Dyer leaned back, fingers loosely interlaced on the armrests. “LEAP.”

The word sat there between us, heavier than four letters should be.

I exhaled. “Yeah. LEAP.”

He didn't say anything. Just gave me space to find the words.

“But to understand LEAP,” I continued, “you probably need to understand why I was so desperate to make it work.”

His eyebrow lifted slightly. Not a question, just an invitation.

“I had forty-three dollars in my bank account when I decided to do it,” I said. “Three months to become employable, that's what they promised. Office Administration training. Weekly stipend. Job placement at the end if you made it through.”

I rubbed my thumb against my jeans, feeling the familiar anxiety settle in.

“The therapy was mandatory,” I added, meeting his eyes. “That first session with you? That was LEAP's version of quality control. If I couldn't prove I was stable enough to show up on time and take criticism without breaking, they'd move on to the next applicant.”

“There were always more applicants,” Dr. Dyer observed quietly.

“Two hundred and seventeen of us that session. All competing for the same thing.”

He made a small note, brief, then looked back at me. “You said you were desperate. Tell me about that.”

I leaned back, staring at the bobblehead as it settled into stillness.

“I wasn't just doing it for the money, though the stipend helped. Two hundred dollars every Friday. That alone was enough to get me in the door.”

“But?” Dr. Dyer prompted gently.

“But I wanted to become someone Neil and Eve didn't have to worry about anymore.”

There it was. The truth I'd been circling for months.

Dr. Dyer's mien didn't change, but his posture shifted. Recognition. “Your friends.”

“My only friends,” I corrected. “The ones who stuck around when I had nothing to offer except problems. I was tired of being the disaster they had to keep checking on. The one they worried about in group chats when I went quiet too long.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees.

“So, when LEAP came up, this chance to actually build something, to prove I could finish something without burning out or disappearing, I took it. Even though I had to come here first.”

“Even though you had to do therapy,” he echoed.

I smirked. “Yeah. Even though.”

The silence stretched. Not uncomfortable. Just room to breathe.

Then Dr. Dyer moved slightly, his chair creaking. “When we first met, you told me you'd moved around a lot.”

My jaw tightened before I forced it to relax. “Yeah.”

“Tell me about that again. I think it's important context for understanding why LEAP mattered so much to you.”

I knew where this was going. We'd touched on it before, but never fully unpacked it.

“Doctor,” I said, staring at my hands, “I can say I've lived in all seven cities in the 757.”

Dr. Dyer didn't nod or drop some canned line about how hard that must've been. He just let me say it.

I could have stopped there. Should have, probably.

But the door was already open.

“Portsmouth. Norfolk. Chesapeake. Virginia Beach. Suffolk. Hampton. Newport News.”

The names came out flat, like a checklist.

“Each one had a house. A room that was never really mine. A bed that never felt like it belonged to me. I'd walk into classrooms full of strangers, forced to introduce myself again and again, same script, same questions, same awkward smile.”

My fingers tapped once against my knee before I stopped them.

“By the tenth round, even the words sounded fake. Like I was auditioning to be myself.”

Dr. Dyer stayed quiet, but I could feel him listening, or just hearing, but actually taking it in.

“I remember sitting in strangers' living rooms,” I continued, voice quieter. “Hands on my knees, waiting for them to decide if I was worth keeping. Some smiled too much, trying to act natural. Others barely glanced at me, just skimmed the paperwork while I sat there like luggage waiting for its next destination.”

The memory sharpened, unwanted but persistent.

“There was this woman once. Offered me a cookie five minutes after meeting me, like sugar could fix the fact that she was just another person I'd have to learn the rules of.”

“Did you take it?” Dr. Dyer asked.

“Yeah. Not because I wanted it. Because it was easier.”

He bowed his head once in understanding, not judgment.

“Some homes were fine,” I said, shifting my weight. “The kind where no one screamed, where no one hit, where I wasn't treated like an inconvenience. Others were colder. Quieter. Like being tolerated but never included.”

I paused, then added, “And then there were the bad ones. The ones where I learned to keep my bag packed, just in case.”

A faint clicking drew me back to the sound of the clock on his wall, ticking unevenly. I blinked, grounding myself in the present.

Dr. Dyer was still watching. Not with pity. Just quiet attention.

“Every transition felt less like being chosen,” I said, “and more like being processed.”

“And you stopped unpacking after a while,” he observed.

“What was the point?” I met his eyes. “My mind kept a running list of possible rules in every new place. Like I was debugging a program no one had bothered to document.”

The silence that followed wasn't heavy. It was just there, holding space.

Then I heard myself talking again.

“I had a foster couple once.” The words came out before I could stop them. “Nice people. Or they seemed nice at first.”

Dr. Dyer waited.

“They thought they couldn't have kids, so they adopted me. It was quick, almost too quick. Usually, the process takes longer, but I guess they had the right connections. One day I was just... theirs.”

I could still picture their faces. The way they smiled at me like I was some missing puzzle piece they'd finally found.

“They made a big deal about family,” I continued. “Kept saying this was permanent. That I was their son now. That we were gonna be a family.”

I leaned back, eyes drifting toward the bookshelf. The memory stayed bright until it tilted.

“Then the test came back positive.”

Dr. Dyer didn't react, but I knew he was listening.

“They were so happy,” I said, almost laughing, though it wasn't a good kind of laugh. “Told me I was going to be a big brother. Made a whole thing out of it. They even got me this navy shirt with big block letters across the front. 'Big Brother.’”

The memory of that shirt cut sharper than the rest. I could still feel the fabric against my skin; the weight of expectation stitched into it. Funny how fabric can outlast people.

“They had this dinner planned,” I went on. “A reveal for their family. I was supposed to walk in wearing it, and everyone would get the message. This perfect little moment.”

I shook my head. “Less than a week later, they sent me back.”

The words hung there.

Dr. Dyer still didn't speak. Didn't rush to fill it.

“They didn't even say why,” I said quietly. “No big speech. No tearful goodbye. Just packed my things, drove me back to the agency, and left.”

I kept my shoulders steady. “I don't think they ever told their family I existed.”

Silence stretched between us. Dr. Dyer didn't rush to fill it or offer neat conclusions.

And somehow, that made it easier to sit with.

He leaned back slightly, elbows resting on the chair's arms. His posture hadn't changed, calm, measured, patient in a way that was neither inviting nor dismissive.

“That must have reinforced a lot of beliefs,” he said finally. “About permanence. About your place in people's lives.”

I didn't answer right away. My eyes drifted to the window, watching dust particles float through a shaft of afternoon light.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It did.”

“And LEAP felt different because...?”

“Because it was concrete. Three months. Specific skills. Clear outcomes.” I tapped my fingers once against the armrest. “If I succeeded, I'd have proof I could finish something. If I failed, at least I'd know it wasn't because someone changed their mind about wanting me around.”

Dr. Dyer nodded slowly. “Control.”

“Or the illusion of it,” I said. “Which is still better than nothing.”

He made another note, then set his pen down.

“We don't have to go into all of it today,” he said. “This is just to get a sense of where you're starting from.”

I nodded along with him.

“But I'd like to hear about the beginning,” he added. “When you first arrived in DC for the program.”

I settled back into the chair, pulling the memory forward.

“It was early September. I took a bus from Virginia for five hours, but it felt longer. I kept checking the same three documents over and over, convinced I'd somehow gotten on the wrong bus and would end up in the wrong city.”

Dr. Dyer's mouth twitched. Almost a smile.

“When I got there, I had two suitcases. One with clothes. One with random things I couldn't throw away: thrift store finds, books I never finished, a newsboy cap Neil said made me look like I was auditioning for a 1920s film.”

“And your first night there?” he prompted.

“Couldn't sleep. Just lay there thinking about everything that could go wrong.”

“Anticipatory anxiety,” he observed.

“Yeah.” I shifted slightly. “But I also felt something else. Something I hadn't felt in a long time.”

“What was that?”

I paused, searching for the right word.

“Hope,” I said finally. “Terrifying, fragile hope that maybe this time would be different. That maybe I could actually pull this off.”

Dr. Dyer leaned forward slightly. “And was it? Different?”

I met his eyes.

“That’s what I’m still trying to figure out.”

He glanced at the clock on his desk. The half-session had moved faster than I expected.

“That’s a good place to stop for today,” he said. “Think about what that first day felt like. We can decide what to do next after this.”

“Alright.”

I stood, grabbing my jacket from the back of the chair.

There was a brief pause, just a beat, where neither of us spoke.

Then Dr. Dyer said, “You’re doing good work here, Samuel. Whether you continue or not, that part matters.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything that wouldn’t sound dismissive or self-deprecating.

“Thanks.”

I wrote that session down tonight, sitting at my kitchen table with coffee that went cold two hours ago. The memory of it is still fresh: Dr. Dyer’s calm silence, the way he let me take my time, the weight of finally saying some of this out loud.

He’d probably say something about how writing it down is part of the work. Processing it. Making sense of what happened.

He’d be right.

They said they’d let me know soon whether I’d continue.

I’m not sure I’m ready to write that one yet.

But I will. Eventually.

For now, this is enough.

Chapter Two

The bus from Virginia to DC took five hours, but my mind had already run through twelve ways the program could reject me before we'd even crossed state lines.

Wrong paperwork. Wrong week. Wrong person entirely, maybe they'd mixed me up with someone who actually had their life together. My brain wouldn't stop cataloging failure scenarios, as if it were preparing a presentation on every way this could go sideways.

I'd been to DC before. After high school, I moved to northern Virginia for a serving job and what people optimistically called a "fresh start." Over time, I learned the Metro system well enough to fake belonging, knew which escalators broke down most often, which stations smelled like piss, and which cars to avoid during rush hour.

But this felt different. Less like exploring. More like reporting for duty.

The program started on Monday. It was only Friday. Still, my brain insisted on running contingency plans: *What if they have no record of me? What if the apartment falls through? What if I somehow got on the wrong bus and ended up in Louisiana?*

When we finally pulled into Union Station, I stepped off with two suitcases.

One held clothes mostly black, a few grays, nothing that required explanation. The other was crammed with things I couldn't throw away: a jacket from a thrift store with a hand-drawn map in Sharpie along the lining, three books I'd never finished but kept

moving with me anyway, a newsboy cap Neil said made me look like I was auditioning for a 1920s film.

I set them down beside a bench and took a breath.

I'm actually doing this.

The station buzzed around me, commuters moving with the kind of purpose I was trying to fake. Announcements echoed overhead, trains hissed to stops, and somewhere nearby a street musician played something that might've been jazz or might've just been noise.

Before heading to the apartment, I stopped to reload my MetroCard. Added a hundred dollars more than I needed, but it felt safer that way, like buying insurance against getting stranded.

The map on the wall looked like abstract art: six color-coded lines tangled across DC and Maryland like someone had dropped spaghetti on a grid and called it infrastructure.

I stared at it, tracing routes I might need. My apartment was near L'Enfant Plaza, which meant I'd mostly be riding the Yellow and Green lines. Green Line to Anacostia if needed. Transfer at Gallery Place to the Red Line. The building where LEAP was held sat just past Union Station, close enough to walk if the trains failed.

My brain was already calculating backup plans for my backup plans.

Fifteen minutes until the next train. Enough time for a call.

I pulled out my phone and dialed.

Neil picked up on the third ring.

“Hello, this is Ash Michaelson Johnson of Ash in Your Face Emporium. For a small fee payable in installments, we'll make sure fake ashes are thrown into the face of someone you dislike, claiming it's yours.”

Despite everything, I grinned. “Did you rehearse that, or is it just off the dome?”

“Pure improv, baby.” His voice crackled faintly, train announcements buzzing in the background on his end. “What's up?”

“I'm back in DC. You still around, or did they ship you off already?”

“South Korea, actually. Got hired last week. Flying out tomorrow.” He paused. “Sorry if you were planning a surprise visit.”

Lucky bastard.

“No worries,” I said, watching the departure board flip numbers. “I wasn't here just for you. I'll be living here for a while.”

“Yeah? Thought you liked Virginia.”

“It's fine. But I got into a program. Office admin training. Pays a stipend.”

“Look at you, chasing stability.” There was that protective edge in his voice, the one that always showed up when I made big decisions. “What program?”

“LEAP.”

Short pause. Just the rhythmic clatter of rails in the background.

“Doesn't ring a bell.”

“You've probably seen their Super Bowl ads. People saying LEAP changed their lives, frog hopping to elevator music, all that corporate inspiration nonsense.”

“If my team's not playing, I skip the Super Bowl.” I could hear the smirk in his voice. “Wait, are you training to be a plumber?”

“Office administration.”

“Didn't see that coming.”

“Yeah, well.” I tightened my grip on my suitcase handle. “Times change. I'm desperate, but like, professionally desperate now.”

Neil laughed. “You sure you can handle it? I can find you something faster if you need.”

“I'm good. I need something long-term. This'll work.”

“Alright. You've got a place to stay, right?”

“Yeah. Room near L'Enfant Plaza. One-sixty a week. Six-forty a month.”

“That's suspiciously specific.”

“I checked it three times before sending the deposit.”

“Pest control included? Bold of them to assume it works.”

“You're supposed to be the responsible one,” I said.

“I am being responsible. That's why I'm asking.” He paused. “You call Eve yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Sam.” His tone changed, half-teasing, half serious. “You need to call her. She's going to want to know about this.”

“I know,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “But she's busy with work. I don't want to interrupt.”

“She's always busy. That's not an excuse.” There was a beat of silence. “Just call her, alright? Before she hears it from me and gets mad at both of us.”

I sighed. “Yeah, okay. I'll call her.”

“Good.” His voice lightened again. “Seriously, though, you good?”

The question landed differently than his usual teasing. Genuine concern underneath the humor.

“Yeah,” I said. And for once, I almost meant it. “I'm good.”

“Alright. Just... don't disappear on me again, yeah? Call when you can.”

“I will.”

“And Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Don't tell Eve about LEAP yet. She'll kill you for not mentioning it sooner.”

I winced. “Yeah. I know.”

His laughter lingered after we hung up, blending with the station's ambient hum.

I pocketed my phone and grabbed my bags.

The apartment was exactly what one hundred sixty dollars a week got you in Southeast DC: functional, forgettable, and flexible.

Month-to-month lease. No commitment. No expectations. The kind of place that didn't ask questions and didn't make promises.

The manager, a woman in her fifties with reading glasses hanging from a chain, handed me the key after I signed three forms that essentially said *that if anything broke, it was my problem*.

“Fifth floor,” she said, not looking up from her clipboard. “First door off the hallway. The elevator's broken, so you'll have to take the stairs.”

Of course it was.

I hauled both suitcases up five flights, my shoulders burning by the third floor. When I finally reached my door, I had to set everything down just to catch my breath.

The key stuck in the lock. I jiggled it twice before it finally turned.

When I pushed the door open, I stopped.

It wasn't much.

But it was mine.

The faint smell of fresh paint mixed with something older, dust, maybe carpet glue, the ghost of whoever lived here before. Light slipped through a narrow window, catching the edge of a worn couch someone had left behind, probably because moving it down five flights wasn't worth the effort.

The main room was small, just enough space for the couch, a folding table, and not much else. The walls were off-white, scuffed in places where previous tenants had bumped furniture or hung things that left marks.

But the bedroom surprised me.

Not just a bed and a closet, there was a tiny porch. West-facing.

I stepped out onto it, testing the railing to make sure it wouldn't give out beneath my weight. The boards creaked but held.

The late afternoon sun painted orange stripes across the floor. For a second, just a second, I let myself picture sitting here in the mornings with coffee, pretending I had my life together.

Pretending this was the kind of place where people lived, not just survived.

The kitchen was barely a kitchen. A narrow counter. A microwave with a working timer. A stovetop with four burners, one of which looked like it hadn't worked since the Clinton administration.

But it was enough. Enough to feel like more than just survival.

I dropped my bags in the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

The cracks in the paint formed patterns, nothing intentional, just the natural way things fall apart over time. My brain wanted to find meaning in them, to trace lines and make shapes, but I forced myself to just look without analyzing.

Fifteen minutes passed, and the same thought kept rolling through my mind.

I want to become someone Neil and Eve don't have to worry about.

The thought settled in my chest, heavier than I wanted it to be. It wasn't new; I'd been carrying it for a while. But hearing Eve's voice, that pride mixed with concern, made it feel more urgent.

They'd stuck with me through everything. Jobs I'd quit. Apartments I'd abandoned. Weeks where I went silent because existing felt like too much effort.

And they never left.

The least I could do was prove I could finish something. Show them their faith wasn't misplaced.

I got up and headed out for a run to the convenience store.

The store was three blocks away, one of those places that sold everything and nothing, shelves crammed with off-brand snacks and dusty cleaning supplies that looked like they'd been there since the building opened.

I grabbed the essentials: instant ramen, canned soup, and a loaf of bread that would last three days if I was lucky. Peanut butter. A jar of cheap grape jelly. Enough to get me through the weekend without having to think about food.

At the register, the clerk, a tired-looking guy in his twenties, barely glanced at me as he scanned everything.

“\$18.47.”

I handed over a twenty, got my change, and walked back to the apartment with my plastic bag cutting into my palm.

When I got back, I unpacked just enough to make the place feel lived-in. Ramen in the cabinet. Bread on the counter. Toothbrush in the bathroom.

Then I lay back down on the bed, ceiling above me, key still in my pocket.

Tomorrow, I'd start figuring out DC. Maybe walk around the National Mall. Maybe just stay inside and mentally prepare for Monday.

But tonight?

Tonight was just about being here.

Quietly.

Carefully.

A start.

Outside, the city hummed distant traffic, muffled conversations, and the occasional siren wailing past. The orange light from the window faded to purple as the sun finally set.

I closed my eyes.

Somewhere between exhaustion and overthinking, I fell asleep.

Chapter Three

I live on a tight budget, and a majority of my money goes towards my savings because it's the only insurance policy I can afford.

Every shopping trip follows a system: two cards, one for bills and savings, one for everything else. A 70/20/10 split. Seventy percent savings, twenty percent essentials, ten percent for whatever keeps life from feeling completely mechanical.

Before I leave, I check my balances like I'm running diagnostics. Bills paid? Check. Savings intact? Check. Enough left to buy food without feeling guilty? Check.

Once everything lines up, I go.

My first stop is always the dollar stores—one where everything actually costs a dollar, another with a “flexible” definition of cheap. Hygiene products, canned food, and small electronics. I catch myself ranking meals by effort-to-nutrition ratio, like I'm designing a survival algorithm instead of just buying dinner.

Tuna kits. Chicken with crackers. Canned vegetables. Pasta. Rice. Ramen still finds its way into the basket every time, less for nutrition, more for nostalgia. At this point, it's a comfort object.

Recently, I started treating myself to pineapple juice and almonds. My brain calls them “luxury variables,” as if labeling them justifies the expense. But really, they're proof I'm not always in survival mode.

For something healthier, I've switched to sandwiches—egg salad, chicken salad, and turkey if I'm feeling ambitious. I stop by the supermarket for fresh bread and produce. I always spend too long

in the bread aisle, debating crust textures as if I'm preparing for a thesis defense on carbohydrates.

Thrift stores and pawn shops are my side quests. I like hunting for small treasures—unique clothes, odd trinkets, things that feel like they have stories. Once, I found a jacket with a hand-drawn map in Sharpie along the lining. Probably nothing important. But I let myself imagine otherwise.

It's the daydreaming that matters more than the finding.

Twice a month, I plan Reset Saturdays—my ritual of getting high and catching a movie. It's maintenance, not indulgence. A way to clear out mental browser tabs before they crash the system.

Living like this takes discipline. But it's empowering. A fragile system, sure. But one I built myself.

And that makes it feel solid.

The weekend passed in a blur of unpacking, organizing, and trying not to spiral about Monday.

Saturday, I explored the neighborhood, found a bodega that sold decent coffee, mapped out the quickest route to the Metro, and located the nearest convenience store for emergencies. Sunday, I stayed in, double-checking my paperwork and mentally rehearsing the commute.

By Sunday night, I'd run through every scenario at least twice.

What if I get lost? What if the Metro breaks down? What if I show up and they have no record of me?

My brain wouldn't quit. So, I did what I always do when overthinking gets loud: I called the people who could talk me down.

She picked up on the second ring.

“Sam! Long time.”

“Hey. You busy?”

“You caught me on my break. Work's been busy—some corporate thing earlier. I still smell like rosemary and regret.”

I smiled. “Sounds about right.”

“So, Neil told me you're doing LEAP.” Her voice became curious, and maybe a little worried. “Office admin?”

“Yeah.”

“That's big. You nervous?”

“A little.”

“You'll figure it out. You always do.” She paused. “Just don't burn out before you start, okay?”

“I won't.”

“Good. Because if you do, I'm dragging you to one of my Sterling Feast gigs and putting you to work.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

“Hey, you ready for the birthday thing?”

“Yours and Neil's? Yeah. Wouldn't miss it.”

“Good. No excuses this year. And don't worry—I'm not baking. After work, I never want to see an oven again.”

“That makes two of us.”

She laughed. “Alright, I should go. Early shift tomorrow.”

“Take care.”

“You too.”

After we hung up, I sat with the quiet for a moment.

Right. I never actually introduced her.

Eve Moore. Cook, caterer, and somehow one of the most grounding people I know. She works for Sterling Feast, a catering company out of Baltimore — corporate events, high-end venues, the kind of occasions where everything has to be perfect and she's the one making sure it is. I met her through Neil a few years back, one of those accidental introductions that quietly becomes one of the most important ones. She's the person who remembers the version of you that existed before everything got complicated — and still shows up anyway.

When the call ended, I sat there for a moment, staring at nothing.

Something was grounding about reconnecting with people who actually remembered you—not just your name, but the version of you that existed before everything got complicated.

I want to become someone they don't have to worry about anymore.

Someone who showed up. Someone who didn't disappear when things got hard.

I wasn't there yet.

But maybe LEAP could get me closer.

Later that night, I made one final check of my bag.

Packet of paperwork? Check.

Pens? Check.

MetroCard loaded? Check.

Everything I need for tomorrow is organized and ready.

I set three alarms on my phone, just the preliminary ones. The real arsenal would come later.

Then I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, knowing sleep wouldn't come easily.

My brain was already calculating routes, backup plans, contingencies for contingencies.

What if I'm late? What if I fail the first test? What if I'm not cut out for this?

I forced myself to breathe.

Just show up. That's all you have to do tomorrow. Just show up.

Somewhere between anxiety and exhaustion, I finally drifted off.

Tomorrow, everything would start.

And I'd either prove I could handle it, or I'd prove everyone right about me.

Either way, I'd know.

Chapter Four

It was 2:47 a.m., and I couldn't sleep. I'd been staring at the LEAP website for the past hour, refreshing the same pages over and over, hoping the information might change if I clicked hard enough. The apartment was silent except for the hum of my laptop and the occasional creak of the building settling.

My brain wouldn't shut up.

Three months. Office Administration. Guaranteed job placement, supposedly. But what if I'm not good enough? What if I can't keep up? What if they figure out I'm just faking competence and I've been doing it my whole life?

I scrolled through the program details again, even though I'd already memorized them.

LEAP: Lionel Employment Achievement Program

A twelve-week employment training initiative for individuals aged 18–35. Career tracks in Culinary Arts, HVAC, Office Administration, and Plumbing. Weekday training from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Weekly stipend every Friday.

The structure is designed to build progressively: an initial orientation period, a ten-week core training phase focused on skill development and workplace application, and a final wrap-up and transition period to prepare participants for employment.

At the end: Preparation, Opportunity, or Recognition.

The words blurred together. I'd read them so many times they'd stopped meaning anything.

I clicked on the Champion Initiative page. Again.

The Champion Initiative recognizes participants who demonstrate exceptional dedication, skill, and growth. Twelve finalists are selected for an exclusive dinner event. Finalists continue for additional weeks of advanced training and evaluation, with the length varying by location. From there, three ultimate winners receive remote work placements with premium partner companies and elevated salaries.

Remote work. Better pay. A chance to disappear if things went sideways.

That was the part that hooked me. Not the prestige. Not the recognition. The escape hatch.

If I won, I could work from anywhere. If I screwed up, I could vanish without anyone watching me fail in real time.

I tabbed over to the testimonials page.

Smiling graduates in pressed shirts. Quotes about “life-changing experiences” and “unlocking potential.” A video of some guy named Marcus talking about how LEAP gave him direction when he had none.

I didn't trust the smiles. But I trusted the weekly stipend.

That alone was enough to get me in the door.

I clicked over to the FAQ section. Read through the same questions I'd already read five times.

What if I miss a day? What if I can't keep up with the coursework? What if I'm not cut out for this?

The website didn't answer those. It just kept showing me the same polished success stories.

I leaned back, rubbing my eyes.

The rational part of my brain knew this was just anxiety. Late-night spiraling. The kind of overthinking that made everything feel impossible.

But the other part—the louder part—kept whispering that I was about to walk into another situation where I'd inevitably disappoint everyone, including myself.

I tabbed back to the program structure.

Twelve weeks. Orientation. Ten weeks of core training. A final transition phase. Paid through the entire program.

I could do this. Probably.

Or I'd crash and burn spectacularly, and Neil and Eve would add me to the list of things they quietly worried about but never said out loud.

I want to become someone they don't have to worry about.

The thought sat heavy in my chest.

I scrolled down to the sponsor logos at the bottom of the page. Dozens of companies I'd never heard of, plus a few I recognized. All of them are looking for “talented, motivated individuals.”

I wasn't sure I was either of those things.

But I was desperate. And desperation had a way of looking like motivation if you squinted hard enough.

I clicked through to the “About LEAP” page—something I'd skipped before, figuring origin stories didn't matter as much as outcomes.

But at 2:47 a.m., with my brain refusing to quiet down, I needed something to fill the silence.

Founded in 2008 by Lionel Thorne, LEAP began as a pilot program in Washington, D.C., with just twenty participants. Lionel, a former corporate executive turned philanthropist, wanted to create pathways for people who traditional employment systems had overlooked.

I scrolled down. There was a photo of Lionel, an older white guy with salt-and-pepper hair, wearing a suit that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. He stood before a group of smiling graduates, arms crossed, looking satisfied.

The kind of photo that screamed, “I changed lives without having to say it.”

“Too many talented individuals are passed over because they lack access to opportunity,” the quote beneath his photo read. “LEAP exists to level that playing field.”

I stared at the words, trying to decide if I believed them.

Did it matter? Probably not. If the program had worked, Lionel's motivations would have been irrelevant. If it hadn't, his good intentions wouldn't have saved me.

Still, there was something oddly reassuring about knowing LEAP wasn't just some corporate tax write-off. Someone—at least in theory—actually cared.

Or maybe I just wanted to believe that.

I kept scrolling.

Since 2008, LEAP has expanded to twelve cities nationwide, training over 50,000 participants across multiple industries. Our success rate speaks for itself: 78% of graduates secure employment within six months of completing the program.

Seventy-eight percent.

Not bad. Not great. But better than my current trajectory of zero percent because I haven't tried anything.

I clicked on another testimonial video. A woman named Jasmine talked about how LEAP helped her transition from food service to office work. She smiled the whole time, gesturing enthusiastically, like she'd found religion instead of just a job.

“I didn't think I could do it,” she said. “But LEAP showed me I had skills I didn't even know I had.”

I paused the video.

Did I have skills I didn't know I had?

Probably not. But I had desperation, a decent work ethic when I wasn't depressed, and an obsessive need not to let Neil and Eve down.

Maybe that would be good enough.

I closed the laptop.

The apartment went dark except for the faint glow of streetlights through the window.

I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Tomorrow—technically today—everything started.

Monday, when I'd find out if I could actually pull this off.

Or if I was just buying myself three months before I ended up back where I started.

I closed my eyes.

Just try. That's all you can do. Just show up and try.

Somewhere between overthinking and exhaustion, I finally fell asleep.

Chapter Five

On the first morning, my first thought was: *I fucking hate these alarm clocks*. Then relief. I'd actually slept.

Yeah, sleep and I have a complicated relationship. Some nights I want it desperately, but it won't come until I find the perfect position (which changes nightly) and stay completely still for an undetermined amount of time. My brain doesn't help—it loves asking questions like “What if we lived on Mars?” or “What's the difference between gummy candy and fruit snacks?” right when I'm trying to do something as basic as not being awake.

But you've probably skipped ahead to the part about my alarm setup.

It's not just about waking up. It's about getting my mind ready. I space them out because I need time to prepare, time to check, recheck, and triple-check everything. Clothes ironed. Bag packed. Papers organized.

If one thing's off, my head won't let it go. I'll replay it like a broken record until I fix it.

I can't risk being late. Not here. Not after everything.

It's my ritual to make sure the day starts right. Because if it doesn't, I know how easily it can fall apart.

The trick is never crawling back under the covers. Because at that moment, they're somehow the most comfortable they've ever been, like my mattress knows I'm trying to leave and suddenly decides to be supportive.

Here's the arsenal:

- Three plug-ins
- Two battery-powered alarms
- One digital wristwatch
- My phone

Set times: 1:25, 1:30, 1:45, 2:00, 2:15, 2:20, 2:45, 3:15, 3:35, 3:45, 3:50, and 4:00.

I had to be fully awake between three and four to leave by five. Half the alarms were standard tones. The rest were chosen purely for how obnoxious they sounded, guaranteed to get me moving.

That's how the day began.

From my apartment, I walked to Anacostia Station and caught the Green Line. Transferred at Gallery Place to the Red Line toward Union Station. Despite the early commuter crush, I arrived ahead of schedule.

A short walk later, I stood in front of the LEAP Hub building.

Tall. Glass. Modern design that screamed, “We're changing the world, or at least want you to think we are.”

Inside, the lobby was already filling with people—folders tucked under arms, coffee cups clutched like flotation devices.

I checked in at reception. Signed two forms confirming attendance, eligibility, and that I understood the policies I'd already read three times online. A woman with a clipboard handed me a packet and directed me toward the auditorium on the second floor.

When I stepped inside, maybe thirty people were already seated.

Not quiet. Not loud. Just that early-morning hum of strangers sizing each other up.

More filed in behind me.

Every few minutes, the door opened again. Another cluster. Another wave. The empty seats disappeared row by row until the auditorium felt tight. Full.

Someone near the front whispered, “How many are there?”

“Two-seventeen,” someone else replied.

That number stuck.

Two hundred and seventeen of us.

The energy shifted as more bodies filled the space. Whispered conversations. Nervous laughter. The rustle of papers as people double-checked they'd brought everything.

I sat near the middle—not too eager, not too invisible—and tried to look like I belonged.

A staff member stepped onto the stage.

“If you haven't already,” she called out, “make sure you've signed in downstairs. We'll be separating you by last name shortly. Listen carefully when your section is called.”

A ripple moved through the room.

They began reading alphabet ranges.

“A through F to the left section. G through M stay center. N through Z to the right.”

Chairs scraped as people scuffled about. Some confused. Some were already prepared.

Wright.

Right side.

I gathered my things and moved with the N-through-Z group. It wasn't dramatic. Just logistical. But something about being sorted alphabetically made it feel official, like we were data points being organized into columns.

Once everyone had settled, the Director walked in.

Tall. Sharp suit. Dark hair perfectly styled. The kind of presence that made you sit up straighter without realizing it. He scanned the room like he was already assessing who'd make it and who wouldn't.

The murmurs died instantly.

He raised a packet of papers. "Did you all receive this when you signed in?"

Scattered murmurs. A few nods.

"Hold it up. You were instructed to bring it."

Papers rustled as everyone complied. I pulled mine from my bag, grateful I'd checked it three times before leaving.

The Director was unreadable. Then he stepped out.

The room fell silent.

Someone coughed. Someone else whispered something I couldn't hear. But mostly, we just waited.

When the Director returned, three security guards followed. A clipboard was now in his hand.

My stomach dropped.

“These individuals arrived after the final check-in time,” he announced, reading names with absolute finality. “You're out of the program. You can try next term again.”

The room went silent.

A few unlucky souls stood and shuffled out, embarrassment etched across their faces. One guy tried to argue, voice rising in protest, but a security guard gestured him toward the door. He left, shoulders slumped.

Two hundred and seventeen had walked in.

Fewer sat there now.

The rest of us stayed frozen, clutching our packets like lifelines.

I didn't move. Didn't breathe.

I was grateful for my absurd alarm routine. But it wasn't just relief. It was a cocktail of emotions I couldn't label fast enough: sympathy for the ones leaving, panic because it could've been me, faint guilt for dodging what they didn't.

When the last of them left, the Director's countenance started to dissipate.

“Welcome to the LEAP program,” he said. “You made it here on time. That's proof you're ready to embark on a journey that will unlock your potential.”

He paused, letting the words stretch across the room.

“You're about to learn skills that define Office Administration. Skills vital to your future. Learn. Adapt. Empower yourselves with knowledge. Aspire to achieve greatness. Prosper in your endeavors.”

Someone whispered Amen from the back.

He outlined the schedule: mornings for Office Administration training—typing, filing systems, Microsoft Office, and email etiquette. Afternoons for workplace professionalism: how to dress, how to speak in meetings, how to navigate office politics without setting yourself on fire.

Every Friday: stipend and progress tests.

“For those pursuing the Champion Initiative,” he added, tone sharpening, “only three will be chosen at the end. You must go above and beyond. Show us what you're capable of.”

He let that sink in.

“This program will challenge you. Some of you will struggle. Some of you will quit. But those who stay—those who commit—will walk out of here with skills that will change your life.”

The speech ended with a decisive nod.

“Supervisors will be assigned to your sections shortly. Pay attention. Ask questions. Don't waste this opportunity.”

He left without waiting for applause.

The room buzzed with nerves and forced optimism. People started talking again, louder now, like the silence had been holding them hostage.

I sat there, thinking about my alarms.

Tomorrow, they'd do it all over again. But today?

Today, I've made it through the door. And that had to count for something.

Chapter Six

As the Director exited, a quiet sense of anticipation lingered in the air. Looking back, it felt almost staged—the careful pacing, the rehearsed optimism—but in the moment, it was just another room full of people pretending not to be nervous.

The Assistant Director stepped up to the podium, posture straight, facial features composed, words lining up like toy soldiers.

They were a distinguished figure: salt-and-pepper hair neatly styled, glasses perched so low on the bridge of their nose I kept waiting for them to slide off. The kind of precision that probably extended to color-coded filing systems and alphabetized spice racks. Their demeanor balanced warmth with authority—the kind of person who could offer a smile and a reprimand in the same breath without changing tone.

“Good morning, everyone,” the Assistant Director began, voice warm but edged with quiet steel. “Welcome to the program. This morning, we began with 217 participants. As you've seen, we've already lost a few due to policy enforcement. Punctuality matters here.”

A ripple moved through the room.

Two hundred and seventeen walked in.

Fewer are sitting here now.

We are all competing for the same outcome. All of us are one mistake away from being sent home.

My brain immediately started running the numbers. If the program had a 70% completion rate—and that was being generous—roughly 65 people in this room wouldn't make it to the end. Some would quit. Some would get kicked out. Some would just... disappear.

I could be one of them.

“Today marks the beginning of a transformative journey,” the Assistant Director continued, “and we're thrilled to have you with us. Throughout this program, you'll acquire valuable skills that can open doors to new opportunities. Each challenge is a stepping stone toward your success. Embrace the process, and don't hesitate to reach out if you need support.”

I glanced around the room. Some people were nodding earnestly, already buying in. Others looked like they were calculating the same odds I was.

The Assistant Director stepped aside, and the Program Coordinator bounded up to the podium with the kind of energy that could power the building's lighting grid.

Red hair caught the overhead lights. A tailored green dress swayed slightly as they took their position. Their smile was wide enough to be genuine or practiced—I couldn't tell which.

“Hello, everyone!” they said brightly, their tone somehow managing to caffeinate the room. “I'll be your go-to person for any questions or concerns. Think of me as your Program GPS—here to reroute you when you take a wrong turn.”

A few people chuckled. I didn't.

I'd been rerouted enough times in my life. Every foster home, every new school, every case worker with a clipboard—they'd all promised to guide me somewhere better. Most of them had just filed the paperwork and moved on.

“We're all about collaboration here,” the coordinator continued. “So don't be afraid to lean on us. Your success is our success.”

Sure, it is.

I caught myself before the cynicism showed on my face. Performative optimism. I could manage that.

Next came the staff parade. Each person took a turn at the podium, offering their own flavor of institutional encouragement.

The Training Instructors went first. One—a tall man with his sleeves rolled up like he was about to fix a broken copier—spoke with the kind of passion that felt rehearsed but not insincere.

“We're here to make sure you don't just learn Office Administration—you own it,” he said. “Our goal is to give you the tools and confidence to thrive in professional environments. By the end of this program, you'll know Microsoft Office, filing systems, workplace communication, and time management inside and out.”

I made a mental note: *Microsoft Office, filing, communication, time management.*

Basic skills. The kind most people probably already knew. The kind I'd have to learn from scratch while pretending I already understood.

The Mentorship Lead followed—a soft-spoken woman with a kind smile that reminded me of a particularly patient librarian. The kind

of person who probably defused HR complaints before they became official.

“Think of us as your guides,” she said gently. “We're here to help you build connections and navigate challenges. This program can be intense, but you're not alone.”

I wondered if anyone actually believed that. If any of them had sat in enough intake meetings to recognize the script.

The Administration Assistant offered only a quick wave and a practical smile. “Anything logistical—scheduling, paperwork, or general chaos—come see me.” Short, sweet, and blessedly brief.

I appreciated the efficiency.

Finally, the Corporate Liaisons took their turn—two professionals who looked like they'd stepped straight out of a networking event. Polished. Confident. The kind of people who shook hands like it was a competitive sport.

“We're the bridge between you and potential employers,” one said, grin equal parts charming and calculated. “At the end of this program, we'll be connecting you with companies looking for exactly what you've learned here. We can't wait to help you explore what's next.”

What's next? Like it was a given. Like we'd all make it through.

Three Champion Initiative spots. The finalists would continue for additional weeks—how many depended on the location—but only three of us would even get that far.

The math wasn't encouraging.

When the introductions ended, the Assistant Director returned to center stage—the closing act of a motivational assembly I'd sat through a dozen times before in different buildings, different cities, different promises.

“Thank you to our dedicated team,” they said. “Now, let's dive into the heart of the program.”

The lights dimmed. A slideshow began—images of smiling graduates in business casual, bustling offices with glass walls and modern furniture, motivational quotes flashing across the screen in bold serif font. I can still picture the way the images flickered slightly against the far wall.

Then came the video.

A montage of LEAP's history played out: archival footage of the first training cohort in 2008, testimonials from past participants, and statistics on job placement rates and average salaries. Uplifting music swelled underneath it all—the kind of orchestral inspiration you'd hear in a commercial during the Super Bowl.

I half-expected an eagle to fly across the screen.

One woman's testimonial stood out. She spoke directly to the camera, eyes bright with conviction. “I didn't think I could do it,” she said. “But LEAP showed me I had skills I didn't even know I had. Now I'm working at a firm I never thought would hire someone like me.”

Someone like me.

The phrase stuck.

I wondered what she meant. Someone without a degree? Someone with a gap in their resume? Someone who'd bounced between cities and jobs and systems that never quite fit?

Someone like me—former foster kid, chronic underachiever, professional survival artist.

My chest tightened.

I forced myself to breathe evenly. No one was watching. No one cared if I looked anxious. We were all too busy pretending we belonged here.

The video ended. The lights came back up.

The Assistant Director's voice cut through the murmur of the room. “Over the next twelve weeks, you'll be challenged. Some of you will struggle. Some of you will surprise yourselves. But if you commit—truly commit—you'll walk out of here with skills that will change your trajectory.”

I stared at my hands, fingers laced together on the table in front of me.

Commit. Don't quit. Don't disappear.

I'd heard that before, too. From teachers who thought I had potential. From case workers who believed this placement would be different. From the couple who'd gotten me the “Big Brother” shirt and then sent me back a week later.

Commitment worked both ways. In my experience, I was usually the only one honoring it.

But this time was supposed to be different.

This time, I'd chosen to be here. I'd signed up. I'd shown up on time. I'd made it past the late-arrival purge.

That had to count for something.

The Assistant Director dismissed us for a fifteen-minute break before the afternoon session. People stood, stretched, and clustered in small groups. Some headed for the hallway. Others stayed seated, scrolling their phones.

I stayed where I was, staring at the LEAP logo projected on the screen.

Learn. Adapt. Empower. Achieve. Prosper.

Five words that sounded like they belonged on a motivational poster in a dentist's office.

But underneath the corporate jargon, there was something real: a structure. A timeline. A finish line.

Twelve weeks.

Three Champion Initiative finalists who would move on beyond that.

One chance to prove I could finish something without burning out or disappearing.

I wanted to become someone Neil and Eve didn't have to worry about anymore. Someone who kept promises—even the ones I made to myself.

I pulled out my phone. No new messages. Neil was probably on his way to South Korea by now. Eve was working another catering shift.

They believed I could do this.

I wasn't sure I believed it yet.

But I'd made it through Day One.

Two hundred and seventeen walked in this morning.

We'd already lost some.

Twelve weeks ahead. Three finalists who would continue.

The odds weren't great.

But I was still here.

I tucked my phone away and waited for the break to end.

Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

Chapter Seven

By Friday, the first week had blurred into a marathon of introductions, orientations, and information that my brain cataloged obsessively, even when I didn't want it to.

But let me back up.

TUESDAY

Tuesday kicked things off with a full tour of the building, our “second home for the next three months,” as one instructor cheerfully reminded us. Rows of cubicles filled the training rooms, each equipped with standard-issue computers that looked like they'd been purchased in bulk decades earlier. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting everything in that particular shade of institutional brightness that made every space feel like a government office waiting for a tax audit.

The building had five floors. We'd be spending most of our time on the third floor — Office Administration training rooms, breakout spaces for group work, a small kitchen area with a microwave that looked like it had survived several presidential administrations.

Our first real training session started at 10 AM.

The instructor, a woman named Ms. Chen with severe bangs and an encouraging smile that never quite reached her eyes, pulled up a PowerPoint presentation titled “Foundations of Office Administration.”

I opened my notebook. Clicked my pen three times. Waited.

“Office Administration,” Ms. Chen began, “is the backbone of any successful organization. You'll learn the systems that keep businesses running smoothly: filing, scheduling, communication protocols, and software proficiency.”

She advanced the slide.

Core Skills:

- Microsoft Office Suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook)
- Filing systems (digital and physical)
- Professional email etiquette
- Time management and scheduling
- Workplace communication

I wrote it all down, even though the slide was probably in the packet they'd given us on Day One. My hand moved across the page automatically, transcribing information my brain was already sorting into categories: *Things I know, things I've heard of, things I'll have to fake until I figure out.*

Microsoft Office fell into the second category. I'd used Word before, mostly for school essays I'd written at 2 AM and turned in late. Excel was a mystery wrapped in spreadsheet cells. PowerPoint seemed self-explanatory, but I'd probably find a way to screw it up.

“By the end of your core training period,” Ms. Chen continued, “you'll be comfortable navigating all of these programs. As the weeks progress, you'll move from basic familiarity to proficiency. By the time you complete the program, you'll be confident enough to walk into any office and hit the ground running.”

Comfortable. Proficient. Confident.

Three words that felt like different languages.

Around me, people were nodding. A few were taking notes. One guy in the back was already on his phone, barely pretending to pay attention.

I wondered how long he'd last.

Ms. Chen walked us through a brief overview of each program, opening files, saving documents, and basic formatting. It was introductory enough that I didn't feel completely lost, but detailed enough that I realized how much I didn't know.

When she opened Excel and started talking about cells, rows, columns, and formulas, my brain did what it always did when faced with new information: it started building frameworks.

Excel is just a grid. Rows are horizontal. Columns are vertical. Cells are the intersections. Formulas are equations that do the math for you.

I could work with that.

By the time the session ended, my hand ached from writing, and my head buzzed with information I'd spend tonight reviewing.

Ms. Chen dismissed us for lunch. "Tomorrow, we'll dive deeper into Word and email etiquette. Come ready to practice."

I gathered my things and headed for the door, already planning how I'd organize tonight's study session.

WEDNESDAY

Wednesday brought two things: more training and team assignments.

The morning session covered email etiquette, writing professional emails, formatting subject lines, and avoiding a tone that's too casual or too formal. Ms. Chen projected examples on the screen, and we spent an hour dissecting what made them effective or terrible.

Bad Example:

Hey Sarah,

can u send me that file? Thanks

-mike

Good Example:

Hi Sarah,

I hope this email finds you well. Could you please send me the quarterly report when you have a moment? Thank you for your assistance.

Best regards,

Mike

I stared at the examples, mentally filing away the differences. Capitalization. Punctuation. Tone. Formality.

It felt like learning a new dialect of a language I thought I already spoke.

One woman raised her hand. "What if the office culture is more casual? Do we still have to be this formal?"

Ms. Chen smiled. “Good question. The key is reading the room. Start formally, then match your colleagues' tone. It's always safer to be too professional than too casual.”

I wrote that down: *Start formal. Match tone. Err on the side of professional.*

Another framework. Another rule to memorize.

After lunch, they gathered us in the main hall for team assignments.

The Assistant Director stood at the podium again, flanked by easels displaying two large posters. One had a wolf painted in silver and gray. The other had a lynx, sleek and watchful.

“You'll be divided into two teams,” the Assistant Director announced. “Wolves and Lynxes. These aren't just names; they represent the qualities we want you to embody. Wolves work as a pack, supporting each other and moving together toward a common goal. Lynxes are independent, observant, and strategic.”

Someone behind me whispered, “What the hell is a Lynx, anyway? Discount panther?”

I bit back a smile.

They read names off a list. Wolves A. Wolves B. Lynxes A. Lynxes B.

When they called my name,” Samuel Wright, Wolves B, “I felt a flicker of something I couldn't quite name. Relief? Anxiety? Both?

Wolves B gathered near the back of the hall, beneath a mural that stretched across the wall. A pack of wolves painted in sweeping gray and silver, standing beneath a full moon that glowed faintly in

the overhead light. Their eyes were sharp, focused, aimed at something beyond the frame.

It wasn't subtle. But it gave the space a sense of identity, like we were supposed to live up to those painted eyes, move together, act like a pack.

I wasn't sure I bought into it.

The lead instructor for Wolves B, a man named Mr. Davison, with a military-straight posture and a handshake that could crush walnuts, addressed our group.

“Welcome to Wolves B,” he said. “You'll be working closely with each other over the duration of this program. I expect teamwork, accountability, and effort. You're not competing against each other; you're competing against the standards of this program. Help each other succeed.”

I looked around at the faces in my group. Roughly twenty people. Some looked eager. Some looked skeptical. Most looked tired.

That's when I noticed him.

A guy standing a few feet to my left, medium build, dark hair, calm demeanor that made him look like he was quietly taking mental notes on everything. He wasn't fidgeting. Wasn't checking his phone. Just... observing.

When Mr. Davison finished talking, the guy turned slightly and caught my eye.

“Aaron Huang,” he said, extending a hand.

I shook it. “Samuel Wright.”

“You nervous?” he asked, voice even.

“Little bit,” I admitted.

He agreed. “Same. But at least we made it past Day One.”

“Yeah.”

There was something steady about him. Not overly friendly, not cold, just present. The kind of person who didn't need to fill silence with noise.

Before I could say anything else, someone else joined us a guy with a sharper energy, restless eyes, and a cynical grin that suggested he'd already decided this whole thing was probably a waste of time, but he was here anyway.

“Marcus Lewis,” he said, not offering a handshake. “Wolves B, huh? Sounds like the JV squad.”

Aaron's mouth twitched. Almost a smile.

“Could be worse,” I said. “Could be the Lynxes.”

Marcus snorted. “True. At least we're not discount panthers.”

And just like that, the tension broke.

We stood there for a moment, three people who'd been sorted into the same group, all of us calculating whether this was going to be an alliance or just proximity.

Mr. Davison clapped his hands. “Alright, Wolves B. Tomorrow, we'll start working on our first group project. Get to know each other. You'll be spending a lot of time together.”

As people began to disperse, Marcus glanced at the mural. “You think they actually expect us to act like a pack?”

“Probably,” Aaron said.

“I’ve never been good with packs,” I said quietly.

Marcus looked at me, and the look in his eyes changed. “Yeah. Me neither.”

Aaron just nodded.

We didn't say anything else. Didn't need to.

But as I walked out of the hall, I thought: *Maybe this won't be completely unbearable.*

THURSDAY

Thursday was the first time we worked in small groups.

Ms. Chen divided Wolves B into groups of three or four and assigned us the task of creating a mock filing system for a fictional company. We had to decide on categories, subcategories, and a labeling convention that made sense.

I ended up with Aaron and Marcus.

Marcus immediately leaned back in his chair. “Filing systems. Riveting.”

“Could be worse,” Aaron said. “Could be cold-calling customers.”

I pulled out a notebook. “Okay. Let's just get this done.”

We spent the next thirty minutes debating how to organize files for a fake marketing firm. It should've been simple. It wasn't.

“Alphabetical by client name,” Marcus suggested.

“What if there are multiple projects per client?” Aaron countered.

“We'd need subcategories.”

“Then we do it by project type first, then client name,” I said.

They both looked at me.

“That makes sense,” Aaron said.

Marcus shrugged. “Fine. Let's go with that.”

We sketched out the system, labeled everything, and presented it to Ms. Chen at the end of the session. She nodded approvingly.

“Good work. Clear hierarchy, logical flow. Well done.”

As we packed up, Marcus muttered, “I can't believe we just spent an hour debating file folders.”

“Welcome to Office Administration,” I said.

Aaron smiled just barely, but it was there.

And for the first time all week, I felt like maybe I wasn't just surviving this. Maybe I was actually... participating.

FRIDAY

Friday was stipend day.

The energy in the building was different, looser, more anticipatory. People moved faster, smiled more, and checked the clock more often.

At 2 PM, they called us into the main hall alphabetically. One by one, we approached a table where the Administration Assistant handed out envelopes.

When they called my name, I walked up, signed the log, and took the envelope.

It was lighter than I expected. Just paper. Just money.

But when I opened it later, sitting on a bench outside the building, and counted the bills, the stack felt heavier than it should have.

First paycheck. I hadn't quit.

In the first week, I'd finished.

I stared at the bills, running my thumb along the edge of one.

This was real. I'd shown up every day. I'd learned things I didn't know. I'd met people who might actually become... something. Friends? Allies? I wasn't sure yet.

But I'd made it.

Two hundred and seventeen people walked into LEAP on Monday.

By Friday, we were already down a few. Some were dismissed for attendance or attitude, or just not fitting whatever invisible metric they were measuring us against.

I wasn't one of them.

I folded the bills carefully and tucked them into my wallet.

Tomorrow, I'd budget. I'd plan. I'd figure out how to stretch this across groceries, MetroCard refills, and the small luxuries that kept me sane.

But tonight?

Tonight, I'd let myself feel something close to pride.

I'd survived Week One.

And that, for now, was enough.

Chapter Eight

End of Week One of LEAP.

Saturday felt earned, even if I wasn't sure I'd done anything yet to deserve it.

I spent it on the beach with the band members of IKY. One quick detour, because today only makes sense if you know where Neil and I started. It's a story we've told strangers more times than I can count, usually softened by the weed we keep around to make noisy nights gentler.

Back in college, IKY didn't mean anything yet. It was just three letters, and there was too much time between classes. The guys joked about starting a sorority instead of a band, flipping through Greek letters until the list looked like an alien language. Then someone noticed they could shape the letters I, K, and Y with one hand each. That sealed it.

IKY stuck. Half a joke at first. Then a habit. Then something that, eight years later, still hadn't fallen apart.

None of us knew then we'd still be playing under those letters, arguing one day about what they actually stood for.

I was in Washington, D.C., on a school trip. I wasn't built for group sightseeing or forced chatter. Even now, I don't know why I signed the permission slip. Maybe it was the promise of "structured fun" that the chaperones kept advertising. I can still see the room bright as a dentist's lamp, loud enough to throb behind the eyes. If I'd been the headache type, I would've folded early.

One prize pulled everyone like a magnet: a retro console, the kind you still find in arcades and forgotten basements. I didn't even

want it. What I wanted was to avoid standing out, and pretending to want what everyone else wanted seemed like the safest way to blend in.

So I lined up for the ball toss.

Cans stacked in a neat little pyramid; a scuffed baseball shoved into each of our palms. The rules were simple: hit the stack, fewer cans left meant you moved on. I've never been much of a thrower, but adrenaline can turn clumsy into competent for a minute. Sometimes I wonder if my brain relies on adrenaline more than it trusts weed. Maybe. I don't get many clean spikes of it to test the theory.

My first throw took eight out of ten. Another kid matched me, which was good enough to advance. The rounds blurred — fewer faces, louder cheering, tighter knots in my shoulders. I kept landing around eight, and when a tie broke, the other kid missed while I grazed one can. Somehow, I slid into the last dozen.

Then it went one-on-one.

That's where I met him — an emo-leaning African-American kid in a long coat that made me feel overheated just looking at it, dreadlocks pulled back in a loose tie.

Neil.

I remember thinking about the coat longer than necessary, half-wondering if he was immune to heat or just committed to the aesthetic.

He flicked a glance at me, then at the girl he'd been talking to between throws. She was cute and trying not to look obvious about liking him. He winked and handed her the ball.

“Are you serious?” she said, eyes wide.

“Go for it,” he told her, like the whole thing was an inside joke.

She missed everything.

I tossed a lazy softball and clipped a single can. It was enough.

By the end, my chest buzzed like a cheap speaker, and I still don’t know how I won with the limited athletic abilities God handed me. My brain insisted on a logical explanation — angle, velocity, probability — like I’d solved a math problem by accident.

But I didn’t solve anything. I just threw a ball, and it worked.

Sometimes reality is less analysis and more dumb luck.

When they pointed me toward the prize table, I walked past it and straight to Neil.

“Do you want the console?” I asked.

“Why?” he said. “Why are you doing this?”

“You could’ve beaten me,” I said. I’d watched his earlier throws.

“You chose not to.”

“For the girl,” he said, half-smiling.

“Right. I don’t want to stare at a console I didn’t really earn.” I shrugged. “Trade me for something. Anything. I barely play. It’ll just gather dust.”

Neil laughed. “I’ve got a gift card to the bookstore outside. Meet me there tomorrow?”

I nodded.

“I’m meeting a friend too — Eve.” He tipped his chin toward the far end of the room, where a girl with black hair and glasses moved quickly between tables, carrying silver trays with more balance than anyone else in the building. “She’s working a Sterling Feast gig. I’ll introduce you.”

Even then, Sterling Feast had that quiet reputation — the kind of catering people booked when they wanted it done right without someone hovering with white gloves.

I nodded again, probably too eagerly, relieved to be invited into any orbit that wasn’t my own. My head spun with half-formed thoughts. What kind of bookstore? Philosophy or glossy magazines? Was this another temporary connection, or something different?

I didn’t know then that Neil and Eve would become the fixed points my life kept circling.

That moment didn’t feel dramatic.

It just felt like a trade.

Console for bookstore card.

Prize for possibility.

The kid in the long coat became the man who shows up for me.

And I walked away with more than I meant to.

“Quiet evening, isn’t it?” Neil said now, smiling.

His voice tugged me out of memory and back into the last light of the day. We were on the sand, the sun lowering itself into the water, as if testing the temperature. Wind caught his dreadlocks and moved them in slow motion. For a second, I saw the emo kid

at the game booth — then my closest friend standing exactly where I needed him to be.

“Going to have that all night?” Kendra asked from my left, nodding at the joint in my hand. “You know what ‘rotation’ means, right? It’s not code for take a hit and hold a silent retreat while the rest of us do personality work.”

I grinned and passed it over.

Kendra’s IKY’s drummer. She stayed quiet around me for weeks after we met. Once she warmed up, she turned out to be exactly the kind of person you want behind you — steady, funny, sharp at the corners. She’d lived in Hong Kong until she was five, though no trace of it clung to her voice now. Her bangs never moved in photos. Not in the wind. Not in salt spray. Perfect, like some higher authority had signed off on them.

We let the joke breathe. The joint made its slow circuit, night arriving one shade at a time. The thing about Neil’s friends is they’re slow burns. They start reserved, almost distant, and then one day you realize you’ve been absorbed into their gravity like you were meant to be there from the start.

I hoped I was already part of it—not just borrowing the warmth.

Kendra passed the joint to Monroe. If Kendra cloaked herself in silence, Monroe — our front man — hid behind a constant stream of chatter. His voice had that lived-in rasp, low and rough like a cassette played too many times. Offstage, though, he never placed himself in his own stories. It was always “a guy I knew,” or “this one time.” He filled the air, but you could feel the sidestep, like he wanted you to look anywhere but directly at him.

Neil once told me Monroe had offered him the lead role years ago, back when the band was still playing in smoke-filled basements, and IKY was just three letters on a poster.

Neil had shrugged it off.

“Leadership isn’t one of his main qualities,” he’d said.

I’d given him a look.

“Aren’t you the leader between you, me, and Eve?”

“No,” Neil said flatly. “Eve is. I just pretend it drives her insane.”

We’d laughed, but after enough time around them, it stopped being a joke.

“Getting chilly,” Kendra murmured, stretching her legs until one bare foot rested on Monroe’s knee. He traced lazy circles along her ankle, eyes fixed on the water darkening with the last streaks of light. They carried themselves with the ease of people who’d known each other too long to keep up walls.

I caught myself picturing their future kids, permanently slathered in sunscreen.

“You’re not inhaling enough,” Neil teased. “If you’re cold, you’re wasting it.”

“Dr. Owens, dispensing wisdom again,” Monroe said with a grin.

We all laughed. Dr. Owens had been Neil’s character in their first collab game — a scientist’s assistant who somehow survived the end of the world with nothing but sarcasm and a lab coat. The nickname never left him.

“I was coaching people through this long before you could walk,” Neil said proudly. “Even Samuel was a straight arrow when I met him.”

“Dr. Owens’s metaphors strike again,” Kendra giggled. They were ridiculous together, and it was strangely comforting.

“My metaphors helped shape this band,” Neil declared.

“Wrong,” Monroe shot back. “That was June’s poetry. Tell him, June.”

The joint had reached June. She was IKY’s bassist, though she occasionally amazed everyone with a flute or a triangle mid-set. Tall, with blue hair that seemed to carry its own weather system, she had a quiet heaviness that softened whatever space she occupied. Her voice carried a Mexican lilt warm enough to feel like a hand on your shoulder. Even when she said nothing, you felt her there.

“My poem gets half the credit,” June said after a slow drag. “Neil just tied it into the story. I wrote it during one of my bluer days.”

“We still haven’t agreed what the Y stands for,” Monroe added casually. “Maybe we’ll figure it out by year ten.”

Neil smirked. “Infinite Kinetic sounds solid enough for the first two letters.”

“For now,” June said softly.

That was IKY — always becoming something slightly different from what it started as.

“Can’t dye my dreadlocks blue,” Neil said, tugging one with mock pride. “They’re already perfect — like some higher authority signed off on them.”

“You all make a great band,” I said, reaching for the joint as it circled back. The familiar anxiety that usually clung to me had loosened; smoke blurred its edges, letting me sit a little easier among them. For once, my brain almost accepted silence without dissecting it.

“So,” Kendra said, wiggling her toes into the sand, “how’s LEAP treating you?”

The question landed softer than I expected, but it still made me pause.

I took a drag before answering.

“Honestly? I keep waiting for them to figure out I don’t belong there.”

Neil glanced over, expression shifting.

“You always say that.”

“I don’t know,” I muttered. “It just feels like I slipped through something.”

I exhaled slowly, watching the smoke drift toward the darkening sky.

“There are over two hundred people in that program. Some of them have office experience. College degrees. Professional backgrounds. The first week barely ended, and I’m still trying to remember keyboard shortcuts.” I let out a hollow laugh. “I’ve got a high school diploma and a talent for showing up on time.”

“That’s more than most people,” Kendra said, gentle but firm.

“Is it?” I stared at the joint in my hand. “I spent the whole week learning things everyone else probably already knows. Excel. Email etiquette. Filing systems.” I shook my head. “I’m twenty-five and just learned what a spreadsheet formula does.”

“And they only select a few people to continue past the program,” I added quietly. “The Champion thing. Feels like aiming at something I don’t even understand yet.”

“You know what my brother said about LEAP?” Kendra asked, shifting to face me more directly.

I shook my head.

“He said it was the worst three months of his life.” She smiled, but something was knowing behind it. “Culinary Arts track. Early mornings. Constant evaluation. Pressure to perform. He wanted to quit at least once a week.”

“What stopped him?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Stubbornness. And maybe the fact that quitting felt worse than staying.” A small smile tugged at her mouth. “Now he runs a food truck in L.A. Does pretty well.”

I tried to picture myself running a food truck. My brain immediately started designing the menu, calculating startup costs, and anticipating health code violations I hadn’t even committed yet. The haze from the joint made it all feel lighter, like a sandbox version of reality.

“Worth it?” I asked.

Kendra considered that. “Depends what you’re running from, I guess.”

The words landed heavier than she probably meant them to.

I wasn’t running from anything specific—not anymore. But I was running toward something. Toward stability. Toward proving I could finish what I started. Toward becoming someone Neil and Eve wouldn’t have to worry about.

“They’ve got this thing called the Champion Initiative,” I said quietly. “Three people out of the whole program get selected at the end. Remote placements. Better pay. It’s competitive.”

“You going for it?” Monroe asked.

“I don’t know.” I passed the joint along. “Feels like aiming too high.”

“Or exactly high enough,” Neil said casually, but I could hear the challenge beneath the words.

“We’ll see.” I let it hang, noncommittal.

June spoke up, soft but clear. “You know what I think? You’ve already done the hardest part.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You showed up.” She met my eyes. “Everything else is just showing up again. And again. Until it’s over.”

I didn’t have a response. I just nodded, letting the smoke blur the edges of my thoughts, softening the pressure of the coming weeks.

The conversation drifted to the band’s upcoming break, Monroe’s plans to visit family over Christmas, and Kendra’s ongoing war

with her apartment's heating system. The sky deepened to purple-blue, waves keeping their steady rhythm. The joint moved again through our circle, each pass slower than the last.

At some point, Neil leaned closer. "I'm heading to South Korea next week," he said quietly, so only I could hear. "The indie film thing. Shooting, editing — the whole process."

My chest tightened. "How long?"

"Month, maybe two. Depends on production."

I nodded, keeping my face neutral. Neil had been my constant for years — the person I could call when everything felt too much, the friend who showed up without needing an explanation. And now he'd be halfway across the world.

"You'll be fine," Neil said, reading my expression. "You've got this. LEAP, the Champion thing — all of it. And Eve's still here if you need someone."

"I know."

"Plus," he added with a grin, "I'll have terrible international phone service, but I'll call when I can. You can tell me all about your spreadsheet adventures."

I snorted. "Can't wait."

He clapped me on the shoulder — brief, grounding.

The night stretched on. Eventually, we rose, movements slowed by smoke, salt air, and the reluctance to leave the moment. Neil brushed sand off his jeans. Monroe helped Kendra to her feet. June gathered the blanket we'd been sitting on.

“We should do this again before I leave,” Neil said as we walked toward the parking lot.

“Definitely,” I said. But I knew it wouldn’t happen. His schedule was packed, and mine was about to get worse. The first week was done. The real work was coming.

This felt like goodbye, even if neither of us said it out loud.

As we reached the cars, Neil pulled me into a quick hug, the kind that said *I’m proud of you* without needing words.

“Don’t disappear on me,” he said.

“I won’t.”

“And Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“You belong here. At LEAP. Don’t let your brain convince you otherwise.”

I wanted to believe him. I wasn’t sure I did yet. But I agreed anyway.

“See you when you get back,” I said.

“See you then.”

He climbed into his car, waved once, and drove off into the night.

I stood there for a moment, watching the taillights fade. Tomorrow, I’d wake up early, budget my stipend, and prep for week two. But tonight, I let myself sit with the weight of his absence — the friend who’d shown up when no one else did, now leaving just when I needed him most.

The city lights blurred past, and I let the haze settle around me. Week one was over. Neil was leaving. The next eleven weeks — uncertain, but mine to navigate.

Chapter Nine

Saturday afternoon, end of my first week at LEAP.

I needed Sanctuary.

Not just for the weed, though that helped, but for the reminder that there were places in DC where I wasn't being evaluated, compared to everyone else in the program, or measured against some invisible standard I'd never quite reach.

The bus ride from my apartment took ten minutes. Five-minute walk from the stop. I'd missed this place, its strange warmth, the way it held space without demanding anything in return.

As I approached, I braced myself for the protest circus that used to camp outside, the chanting, the signs, the motivational cardio session disguised as moral outrage.

But things had changed.

Across the street, the protesters were long gone, no picket lines, no bullhorns, no performative righteousness. In their place stood STAND's newest billboard, loud and self-righteous in backlit LED.

An ice cream cone, topped not with a scoop but with a bulbous pink brain. In all caps:

“MARIJUANA: THE REAL BRAIN FREEZE”

STAND

I stopped walking. Stared at it.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” a voice called.

I turned. Carmen Morales stood in Sanctuary's doorway, arms crossed, grinning like she'd been waiting for my reaction.

“It's something,” I said, walking toward her.

“STAND's latest masterpiece,” she said, gesturing at the billboard with mock reverence. “Harlan Fletcher's crusade continues.”

“Who's Harlan Fletcher?”

Carmen stopped, eyebrows raised. “Wait... you really don't know?” She glanced at Ruth, then back at me. “Let me guess — all you know about STAND is from those elementary school assemblies they used to do, right? And... from Neil griping about the protesters before they finally disappeared?”

I shrugged, a little sheepish. “Yeah. That's about it.”

She raised a brow, half amused. “Fair. You've got some context, but not enough to be dangerous.”

I agreed. Exactly. Enough to recognize the absurdity without fully understanding the machinery behind it.

“Fair enough.” Carmen held the door open for me. “Harlan Fletcher's a former televangelist turned anti-weed warrior. He resurrected some old anti-bullying group ‘STAND Together’, all one word, capital letters for aesthetic, and rebranded it into this.”

She waved vaguely at the billboard. “Now they're trying to re-illegalize marijuana and 'save America's youth from chronic sin.’”

I snorted. “Chronic sin. That's good.”

“They used to rip phone books in middle schools,” she continued as we walked inside. “The whole thing was very inspirational, muscular motivational speakers demonstrating 'the power of standing together' by tearing phone books in half. Worked great until some kids took the message literally and destroyed a teacher's rare book collection.”

“You're kidding.”

“I wish.” Ruth Cooper’s short brown hair caught the light. “There were lawsuits. Public apologies. The whole thing went quiet for a while. Then Fletcher showed up, slapped a new mission statement on it, and now they're comparing weed to brain freeze.”

I glanced back at the billboard through the window. “Because that's definitely going to win hearts and minds.”

“Right?” Carmen laughed. “Ambition's already dead. Weed just sends flowers to the funeral.”

Ruth's mouth twitched into something close to a smile. “I'm stealing that.”

“Be my guest.”

Inside, Sanctuary greeted me like an old friend.

A square pillar stood in the center of the room, left over from whatever business had come before. A piece of paper was taped to it with “COMING SOON” scrawled in thick black marker, and somehow, it fit.

The place always had that vibe, something about to happen. I caught myself wondering what it used to be: a bank, a laundromat, maybe some doomed office supply store. Then my brain spun off, picturing the ghosts of staplers and copy machines haunting the corners — typical detour.

Soft music floated through the air, easy and low, cushioning the scene. Deep green and muted gray walls gave the room an earthy calm, while the polished concrete floor reflected the mellow glow of hanging lights. Discreet high-end cameras perched in the corners, watchful but never intrusive. I noticed the angles

automatically, filing them away like I was decoding ancient script instead of casing the place for a heist I'd never actually attempt.

To my left, the “**RUMINATION**” board presented a chaotic collage of flyers: open mic nights, yoga meetups, “Bong and Gong” meditation sessions, along with a few anti-weed pamphlets someone had pinned up as a joke. I squinted at one with the headline *Cannabis Kills Ambition* and thought about adding my own: *Ambition Killed Itself Cannabis Just Attended the Funeral*.

The right wall displayed a neatly curated selection of merchandise, socks, mugs, games, ashtrays, and quirky lights, all lined up like votives to some new religion. A lava lamp flickered on the corner shelf, and I nearly convinced myself it was calling my name until I remembered I already owned three things that hummed or glowed and didn't need to add another to the collection.

Beyond that, the cannabis section stretched like a menu for people who took their relaxation seriously: concentrates, artisan edibles, pre-rolls, vapes, even old-school papers. I caught myself cataloging them like flashcards, almost turning it into a study exercise before realizing I wasn't taking a test.

At the heart of the space sat the **4:21 Café**, a perfect blend of old-school diner charm and modern flair. The booths, upholstered in vibrant teal and mustard, lent the place a retro pulse that felt oddly alive. Stainless-steel counters caught the glow of pendant lights nostalgic enough to nod at the past without feeling trapped there.

The café didn't serve edibles, but it didn't need to. The menu leaned into comfort food pizza slices, sliders, loaded fries, chips, cold sodas, and a small graveyard of energy drinks, exactly what you'd want if the munchies hit or if you just needed an excuse not to cook.

At one end, a modest stage waited. Nothing fancy: a mic stand, two speakers, a patch of floor big enough for one brave soul. On open-mic nights, it became the beating heart of Sanctuary, nervous jokes, shaky covers, raw originals, all carried by the kind of audience that clapped even harder when someone bombed. I always admired that. Failing publicly terrified me, but there was something honest in watching people do it and survive.

Sanctuary was more than a dispensary. It was a place where strangers loosened into friends, where rebellion mingled with comfort, where cannabis culture wasn't just tolerated but celebrated.

I drifted among the shelves, half-absorbed by the sheer variety. After some deliberation — read: ten minutes of standing frozen as though I were decoding ancient script, I settled on an Indica strain. At the merch rack, a black T-shirt with a clean moon graphic caught my eye, so I added it to the pile along with a pack of green gummies.

A light tap on my shoulder snapped me out of it.

“Hey, stranger!”

I turned, startled, then broke into a grin. Carmen stood there, ink-dark hair framing her face, her eyes carrying that playful spark that made her impossible to ignore.

“Carmen! You nearly gave me a heart attack,” I laughed.

She tilted her head, smirking. “Worth it. Also, I called it. You went green.”

“You... called it?”

“Yep. Ruth and I had a bet. I picked green, she picked blue.” Carmen gestured, and Ruth appeared at her side, calm as ever.

Ruth shook her head with mock gravity. “I was sure you'd go blue.”

“Green is clearly superior,” I said, holding up the gummies like proof.

“Incorrect,” Carmen declared, mock-serious. “The correct answer was red.”

We all laughed, the silliness making the air lighter.

“Neil said you might drop by,” Carmen added. “How's the program going?”

“It's called LEAP,” I told them. “Three months. Office Administration training.”

“Ambitious,” Ruth said, her tone approving. “How was the first week?”

I considered lying, saying it was fine, easy, exactly what I expected. But something about Sanctuary made pretense feel unnecessary.

“Exhausting,” I admitted. “I spent five days learning things I should probably already know. Email etiquette. Filing systems. Excel formulas that still don't make sense.”

“Sounds thrilling,” Carmen said with a grin.

“Oh, it's riveting.” I set my items on the counter. “But I made it through. Got my first stipend yesterday.”

“That's huge,” Ruth said. “First paycheck always hits different.”

“Yeah.” I paused. “There's this thing at the end of the Champion Initiative. Three people get selected for remote work placements. Better pay. It's competitive.”

“You going for it?” Carmen asked.

“I don't know. Feels like aiming too high.”

Ruth met my eyes, her expression steady. “Or exactly high enough.”

I'd heard that before from Neil, just last night on the beach. Maybe everyone could see something I couldn't. Or maybe they were just better at pretending confidence was contagious.

“We're rooting for you,” Carmen said, ringing up my purchase. “Though next time, go for blue. I want Ruth to win a bet.”

“No promises,” I said, handing over cash.

Carmen bagged everything, then leaned against the counter. “You see the pillar sign?”

“Yeah. 'Coming Soon.' What's that about?”

“I designed it,” she said with a conspiratorial grin. “Something Ralph's cooking up. Big plans. Secret plans. He won't tell us yet, but he's been sketching things in his office for weeks.”

“Is Ralph around?” I asked.

They both shook their heads.

“Nope,” Ruth said evenly. “He's off doing Ralph things.”

“Classic Ralph,” I muttered.

Carmen leaned closer, lowering her voice. “Between us? He's been gone a while now. Marketing stuff, mostly. But he's also been in meetings with some indie company about turning the whole vibe of this place into merchandise. And he's been visiting a big cat sanctuary out of state. Whatever he's cooking up, it's big.”

“Guess we'll find out when the sign changes,” I said.

“Exactly.”

We talked a little longer in an easy conversation that flowed without effort. Carmen told me about a disastrous open-mic night where someone's poetry reading turned into a fifteen-minute rant about parking meters. Ruth mentioned a regular who'd tried to pay for edibles with a handful of arcade tokens.

The kind of stories that made Sanctuary feel less like a business and more like a badly organized family.

Eventually, I grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

“Take care of yourself, Samuel,” Ruth called after me.

“Always do,” I said.

“Liar,” Carmen added with a grin.

I stepped out into the cool evening air.

Across the street, the billboard still glowed STAND's brain freeze warning, as permanent as it was pointless.

But for the first time in days, my brain wasn't cataloging failure scenarios. The knot in my shoulders had loosened. Carmen and Ruth had reminded me that not every space required performance.

I could still be Samuel here. Not just a line item in someone else's data set. Not someone being measured against an invisible curve.

Just Samuel.

I started walking toward the bus stop, the Sanctuary bag swinging at my side.

Tomorrow was Sunday. I'd budget my stipend, prep for Week Two, maybe get high and let my brain wander to that quiet field with the thin ring hanging in the sky.

Monday would be the real work. Week Two. More training. More evaluation. More proving I belonged in a room full of people who probably had better reasons to be there.

But tonight?

Tonight, I had this. Sanctuary. Carmen and Ruth. A place that didn't ask me to be anything other than myself.

That would have to carry me through the week ahead.

I boarded the bus, found a seat near the back, and watched the city lights blur past the window.

Week One: survived.

Neil: gone.

Eleven weeks left.

But I wasn't starting from zero anymore.

I had people. I had a routine. I had proof I could show up and finish what I started.

And maybe just maybe that was enough.

Chapter Ten

Sunday night. End of week one. I'd survived.

Monday morning—207 people walked into LEAP. Friday morning—we were down to 201. We were down 16 participants before the real job ever started. The cause of termination varied: misfiling paperwork, failing the initial competence test, and just showing up on time.

My apartment was quiet except for the city hum outside. The stipend envelope sat on my folding table—\$200 that felt heavier than it should. Proof I'd made it through. Proof I could show up, learn things I didn't know, and not quit when my brain started cataloging all the ways I didn't belong.

Tomorrow, Week Two will start. The real training would begin. Office Administration skills we'd actually be tested on. The slow sorting process that would eventually lead to twelve finalists, then three Champions.

But tonight, I needed to step back. Process. Breathe.

I rolled a joint and settled by the window, watching DC's lights flicker in the darkness. As the first hit smoothed the edges of my anticipation about Monday, I found myself thinking about how I got here. Not to LEAP. Not to DC. But to this specific ritual that made survival feel possible.

That morning, I'd woken before the city, rolling out of bed in the half-dark with only the hum of too many alarms for company. A quick grind, a flick of flame, and the first inhale hit me like a small reset button. I sat by the window, watching the dusky sky bruise

purple and gold while the world outside hadn't yet remembered to be loud. Wake and Bake, properly observed.

There was something about smoking into stillness—the air thin, the streets quiet—that made me feel less like I was wasting time and more like I was syncing up with it. Almost like the city and I were briefly on the same clock before it sprinted ahead again.

And every time that stillness hit just right, my mind drifted to the same place: my own quiet space where I could breathe. It looked like Earth—green fields, soft light—but with something altered at the horizon. Not another planet. Not something dramatic. Just a doorway. Tall. Open. Wider than it should've been. A frame without walls, standing alone in the distance like an invitation.

Not an escape pod. Not a fantasy world. Just an expanded entrance to something quieter.

It was the mental doorway I built long before I understood why I needed one.

For those curious—or maybe not so curious—about how I keep weed from wrecking my wallet, it ties into my monthly ritual. At the start of each month, I budget for the usual: bills, upcoming expenses, and a small “life chaos” fund. Tucked in there, like a secret handshake with myself, are two Saturdays set aside for a proper Wake & Bake. Those are the days I clock out from responsibility and let life blur pleasantly at the edges—a mini experiment in losing time on purpose.

Usually, it's edibles. Lately, though, I've been testing cannabis teas, trying to figure out which ones don't taste like someone steeped grass clippings in regret. I keep notes like it's a science project: “*Citrusy, faint buzz, avoid before walking uphill.*” Once it kicks in,

I roam whatever neighborhood I'm in, maybe catch a movie, or stand on a corner and admire crowds like they're street performers waiting for their big break. Sundays vanish too quickly anyway, so those Saturdays are my little rebellion.

My hazed journey started much earlier, back in middle school, at a party I got into thanks to an unspoken deal with my classmates. The trade was simple: I shared test answers and homework, and they let me into their social bubble. Friends by transaction. It worked. I didn't eat alone, and I didn't get ditched on group projects. That was enough back then.

This system ran like a low-key cartel: bus rides with swapped homework, scantrons quietly passed down aisles, and entire seating charts propped up on my scribbles. Some teachers didn't even bother pretending they didn't see. One handed me the answer key outright and said, "Make sure everyone's on the same page." I don't think he meant academically. Part of me wondered if he respected the efficiency, as I'd accidentally built a black-market tutoring empire.

One of my beneficiaries was Michael, our lacrosse captain. His version of gratitude was an invite to his end-of-summer party and, apparently, my initiation into smoking weed.

The party was... nice. Michael's house sat on a manicured street where even the trees looked like real estate agents had scouted them. The driveway curled like it had been designed for dramatic entrances. From the sidewalk, I could already hear splashing and laughter. In the backyard: glowing pool, steaming hot tub, bronzed twenty-somethings in swimwear. Michael had told me to bring trunks. I hadn't. The thought of stripping down next to people who

probably had six-packs by now? Hard pass. My abs were shy, and my toes looked like they'd lost a bar fight.

Inside, the vibe was chaotic in a fun way. Kids huddled in circles: some at card games, some nursing sodas they were pretending were beers, a few glued to a zombie movie on TV. The special effects were so bad that one kid groaned louder than the fake corpses, muttering, "I've seen scarier oatmeal."

Later, Michael pulled me upstairs like he was about to reveal a national treasure. His room screamed athlete royalty: giant flat-screen, shelves lined with trophies, the faint smell of body spray trying to wrestle with gym socks. And in the center of it all—a glass bong shaped like a globe, etched with glowing white continents. It looked less like drug paraphernalia and more like something Indiana Jones should've been chased for.

Michael clapped his hands. "Alright, everyone, listen up!" he announced, grinning at me. "Big thanks to Samuel here—without him, I'd be repeating eighth grade. The man saved my ass."

The room cheered. I stood awkwardly, caught between embarrassment and a weird sense of pride.

"And to celebrate," Michael went on, gesturing to the globe bong, "we're packing it with Dr. Who. Legendary strain. And Samuel gets the first hit. Time for this brainiac to actually travel through space and time."

He handed it to me with a wink. The bowl was lit. Smoke swirled inside like a storm system on fast-forward. I pressed my lips to the glass and inhaled deeply.

Big mistake.

The first pull went in sideways, like I'd tried to inhale a fistful of sand. My chest seized. I coughed so hard my eyes watered, my ribs warning me to reconsider life choices. The room broke into laughter—easy, warm, nobody being cruel. Heat climbed my face while I hacked out what felt like a fragment of my soul, then finally let a gray cloud spill from my mouth like a truce flag.

I drifted toward an empty corner of the couch where a cluster of kids were still glued to a zombie movie that looked like it had been filmed in someone's basement. I kept coughing a bit, my lungs protesting the ambush, but the fit loosened and slid away. The cushions accepted me. On-screen, a rubber corpse tripped over a coffee table and face-planted. That was the exact moment the lift began.

At first, it was quiet. My breathing evened out, each exhale smoothing the edges of everything. The frantic wheels in my head—homework, who was watching me, what I looked like—clicked down a gear. My heartbeat found a steady lane. The knot that lived at the base of my neck unwound, not dramatically, just a slow unscrewing, like a jar lid someone had already loosened for me.

Inside my skull, I started seeing the field. Not literally, of course, but in the way my imagination took flight. Wide, sun-bleached, like an empty soccer field waiting for a game. Green grass. Blue sky. Ordinary—except for one thing: at the far edge of it stood a doorway.

Tall. Open. Wider than it should've been.

No walls attached to it. No building behind it. Just a frame standing alone against the horizon, like an invitation.

It didn't glow or shimmer. It just simply— was; ordinary and nothing more.

That doorway anchored the entire scene. A threshold I could cross whenever the noise got too loud. A structure in a place that otherwise needed none.

Little lights flickered in that imagined space, like a block of city streetlamps waking up at dusk. I snorted at my own thought. A couple of kids glanced over, recognized the glassy eyes and lazy grin, and gave me the welcome-citizen smile. I didn't care how I looked. I wasn't measuring myself against anyone's reflection. For once, I was only where I was—on a sagging couch, in a too-bright room, surrounded by strangers who didn't feel like strangers. My brain usually runs three tabs at once, cross-referencing scenarios no one asked for, but right then? Just one window open. Stillness, for a change.

Someone passed a plate, and I took a slice of pizza and a handful of chips. The combo hit like a marching band: grease, salt, sweet tomato, the soft give of crust. Ridiculous, perfect. I kept smiling. The zombie movie limped through another groan, and I caught myself thinking the special effects deserved a plaque in a museum labeled *We Did Our Best*. My mind even started designing the exhibit: broken foam heads under glass, a looping video of ketchup blood refusing to congeal. Tomorrow and all its chores stepped back a few paces. The weights I usually haul around loosened their straps. I stayed put.

By high school, the arrangement had changed. The favor economy turned into a standing invitation to take a couple of hits behind the gym after the last bell. I wasn't a fixture, just a sometimes-face, but I'd earned space on the curb with them. We'd lean against the

warm brick, trade two jokes and a silence, and let the afternoon soften.

The best way I can explain getting high is as a doorway. Not a magic portal with smoke machines—just a plain door you’ve walked past a thousand times. On the other side is relief, or at least different air. Each time I use it, I step a little further in, and the house changes.

First step: what I think of as the porch stage, the casual one. I’m still in daylight. The breeze tucks under my collar, my shoulders drop a notch, and conversation loosens its tie. Nothing monumental happens. The world fuzzes just enough to forgive me for being in it. This is where you sit on the steps with a friend, talking about nothing until it turns into something. Laughter arrives on time without checking in at the front desk.

And somewhere in the back of my head, the field waits—wide, sun-bleached, open. At the far edge of it stands a doorway. Tall. Open. Wider than it should’ve been. No walls attached to it. Just a frame standing alone in the distance, like an invitation. A quiet place that doesn’t demand anything from me, ready whenever I need it.

On my designated Saturdays, I go past the threshold. Inside smells like color. Sounds pick up extra threads I hadn’t noticed before—the hum inside a refrigerator, the quiet static of the city thinking to itself. Time stretches, not like a rubber band about to snap, but like taffy being pulled by someone patient. Seconds grow long legs. If I’m walking, street signs feel like they’re waving. If I’m writing, ideas line up at the door, and I forget to behave. I’ve scribbled some of my strangest notes here, most still making sense in the

morning once I decipher my handwriting, which insists on becoming modern art.

Somewhere in there, a callback always appears: that first party, a zombie flopping over a couch in my head, and I laugh out loud in a quiet room. People glance. I shrug. They nod. Membership is flexible.

There's a door in my mind. I found it years ago, and once you find a door like that, you don't forget where it is. You couldn't if you tried. It stands at the edge of everything loud, everything sharp, everything that won't stop pressing against you.

On the other side of that door is another world. Not a fantasy. Not some neon hallucination. It's quieter than that. Simpler. It's a place where the noise finally agrees to stop. Where stillness isn't something you have to chase — it just is. The air feels different there. It sits in your lungs like it belongs, like your chest was always meant to expand that way: slow, full, unhurried. Peace lives there the way gravity lives here — constant, invisible, holding everything gently in place.

And the sky — God, the sky. The first time I looked up in that world, I forgot how to breathe for a different reason. There's a ring across it. A massive arc of stone stretching from horizon to horizon — thousands, maybe millions of rocks suspended in slow formation, circling the planet in patient silence. Not floating wildly. Not chaotic. Ordered. Intentional. You can see the individual shapes if you look long enough, each one catching light differently, each one turning at its own pace without ever breaking the pattern. The ring doesn't sit straight overhead and end. It curves down toward the distance, sweeping across the sky like a

bridge to somewhere even quieter, disappearing where land dissolves into blue.

You can sit beneath it for hours. Watch the light shift across the stone. Watch shadows slide across the ground in patterns that never repeat. It makes you feel small in the right way — not insignificant, just unburdened. Like the universe is so wide and so steady that whatever you've been carrying doesn't get to define you anymore.

I have two modes with that door. Two ways of using it, depending on how deep the day has cut.

Mode one — I stay in the doorway. I don't cross over. I lean against the frame with one foot still planted in the real world, and I let the air from the other side reach me. I can feel it on my face, cool and forgiving. My shoulders drop without me telling them to. My thoughts slow down. They lose their sharp edges. I don't need to disappear inside it. I just need to remember it exists. A few breaths there, and I can turn back around. I can handle what's waiting. Mode one is maintenance. It's a hand at the center of my back saying, you're still here.

Mode two is different.

Mode two is when the world has been too much for too long, when the noise has worked its way into my bones. When my jaw has been clenched so tightly for so many hours that I forget what my own face feels like when relaxed. Mode two is when standing in the doorway isn't enough.

So I step through.

I cross over fully, and I close the door behind me. The quiet seals. There's always somewhere to sit — that's the strange mercy of it

— and I lower myself down like someone who hasn't rested in years. The ring turns above me in slow, deliberate silence. I watch it the way you watch fire. Not analyzing. Not solving. Just witnessing.

The stillness wraps around me without pressure. My thoughts don't race there. They drift. Unhurried. My heartbeat slows until I stop noticing it, and for once, that doesn't scare me. Everything that had its hands around my throat loosens its grip. The weight drops away in pieces. I sit beneath that sky wrapped in stone, and for a while, I don't have to defend myself from anything.

Mode two isn't maintenance.

Mode two is survival.

And I won't apologize for knowing where that door is. Some people pray. Some people run. Some people pour whiskey until their edges soften. I walk through a door. I sit down beneath a sky held together by gravity and time. And for a little while, I let the peace do what the world refuses to — I let it leave me alone.

When I come back, the room is still there.

The movie is limping toward its credits. Someone boos at the screen, and the sound can be heard. A throw pillow arcs through the air and misses by a mile. I wipe my eyes, which have decided to water again for reasons that don't need explaining. The pizza plate is empty. My chest doesn't hurt anymore.

In the corner, the lamp hums softly, and for reasons I can't articulate, the sound makes perfect sense.

I look around and think: okay. I can carry myself from here.

Outside the window, the city has settled into deep blue. I close my eyes and still see the horizon line — the open stretch of it, the ring cutting quietly across the sky, the door standing exactly where I left it.

My private architecture of calm.

Week One: survived.

Neil: gone to South Korea.

Week Two: starting tomorrow.

Twelve weeks until the Champion Initiative finals.

I wasn't naïve enough to think I'd win. Two hundred and seventeen people had walked into that auditorium on Monday. By the time the first week officially began, we were down to 201. Sixteen gone before the real training even started—terminated for something as simple as being late. By the end of twelve weeks, only three would be named Champions.

But I was stubborn enough to try.

The joint had burned to the ground. I stubbed it out, feeling the familiar looseness in my shoulders, the quiet in my head.

Tomorrow I'd be Samuel Wright again—one of 201 still standing, competing for three spots. I'd sit in training sessions and learn things I should already know. I'd pretend confidence while my brain cataloged every way I didn't measure up. I'd show up on time, take notes, and hope that would be enough.

Tonight, I was just Samuel, sitting by a window, holding space for myself.

And that, for now, was enough.

I stood, stretched, and headed to bed.

My alarms would go off at 1:25 AM.

The routine would start again.

But I'd be ready.

Week Two was coming.

And I wasn't starting from zero anymore.

I had proof I could survive a week. I had Aaron and Marcus—maybe allies, maybe just proximity, but not nothing. I had Carmen and Ruth at Sanctuary. I had this ritual, this doorway, this quiet field waiting at the edge of my mind.

I had a system. A structure. A way to carry myself forward.

Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

But tonight, I rested.

And in the space between waking and sleep, I saw it again—the field, the doorway standing open at the horizon, the quiet—and knew it would be there waiting whenever I needed to find my way back.

Chapter Eleven

End of Week Two. Sunday evening.

I couldn't sit still.

My apartment felt smaller than usual—walls closing in, ceiling pressing down, the hum of the city outside somehow louder than it had any right to be. I'd spent the day reviewing Excel formulas until the cells blurred together, trying to memorize keyboard shortcuts that kept slipping out of my brain the moment I looked away.

Tomorrow would be Week Three. More training. More evaluation. More proof that I was barely keeping up while everyone else seemed to know already what they were doing.

I needed to hear familiar voices.

I grabbed my phone and dialed, pacing slow laps around my room. The lamp on my desk cast an amber circle over the clutter of notes and printouts. The window, cracked an inch, let in a thin thread of cool air that did nothing to settle my restlessness.

Eve picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Sam! What's up?”

“Hey, Eve.” I turned toward the window, tracing a finger along the condensation on the glass. “I was hoping you could add Neil to the call. I still haven't figured out how to do it.”

She laughed softly. “Of course. One sec. You really are hopeless with tech, huh?”

“Guilty.”

A faint tapping in the background, then Neil's voice:

“Birthday squad assembles! What's the plan?”

I smiled despite myself. “Hey, Neil. Figured we should start talking about my birthday. It's coming up faster than I thought.”

“Ah, yes, the sacred tradition,” Neil said. “July through December—the six months when all our birthdays hit. Ralph starts it off in July, Carmen and Ruth in August, you in September, me in October, Eve closes it out in December.”

“Started as a joke,” Eve added warmly. “But now it's the law.”

I stopped pacing for a moment, leaning against the wall. “I'm thinking of doing something this year. Still figuring out what, but... something.”

“That sounds perfect!” Eve said brightly. “I've got vacation days saved up. I'm definitely in.”

“Same here,” Neil added. “A chill weekend sounds amazing. Actually, I've got something planned before I leave. But you'll have to wait. It's a surprise.”

I groaned. “Oh no, not another one of your surprises.”

Eve laughed. “Last time we ended up at that karaoke bar with only 2000s emo hits.”

“And wasn't it glorious?” Neil shot back.

I couldn't help grinning. “That does sound like your idea of fun.”

“Hey, no spoilers,” Neil said. “You'll just have to trust me.”

“Fair enough,” Eve said. “Now I'm curious about both surprises.”

I resumed pacing, my sock catching on the frayed edge of the rug. “Speaking of surprises—I stopped by Sanctuary earlier this week. Ralph wasn't around. Any idea what he's up to?”

Neil paused. “Yeah, he mentioned something about business stuff. Said he's got a surprise of his own when it's ready.”

“Another surprise?” I asked. “This is becoming a theme.”

“If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?” Neil teased.

Eve's tone softened. “Sam, how's LEAP going? We haven't really talked about it much.”

I stopped mid-step, staring at the stack of notes on my desk—Excel formulas, email templates, filing system hierarchies.

“It's... going,” I said carefully. “Pretty intense.”

“Intense how?” Eve pressed gently.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Just a lot to learn. Fast. Everyone else seems to know this stuff already, and I'm just trying to keep my head above water.”

“You're doing fine,” Neil said firmly. “You always figure it out.”

“Do I?” I asked, sharper than I intended. I forced a breath. “Some days I feel like I'm faking it and waiting for someone to notice.”

“You're not faking anything,” Eve said softly. “You showed up. You're learning. That's nothing.”

“Exactly,” Neil added. “And hey, pace yourself, man. Don't let them burn you out before your birthday.”

“If they do,” Eve said, “we'll kidnap you for a week. Problem solved.”

I managed a small laugh, some of the tension in my chest loosening. “I’ll hold you to that.”

We talked a while longer, updates and teasing filling the comfortable rhythm of people who’d known each other long enough that silence wasn’t awkward. Eve mentioned a nightmare catering gig with a bride who’d changed the menu four times. Neil talked about packing and final preparations for his trip to South Korea.

“We’re flying out tomorrow,” Neil said. “Month, maybe two. Depends on shooting.”

My stomach dropped slightly. Neil’s leaving meant one less person to call when things got overwhelming. But I kept my voice steady. “That’s exciting. You’ll kill it.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll call when I can, but international service is garbage. You’ve got Eve, though.”

“And you’ve got this,” Eve added. “LEAP, the birthday thing, all of it. We’re rooting for you.”

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat. “Thanks. Really.”

The conversation wound down with promises to check in soon, more birthday planning to come, and Eve threatening to show up at my apartment if I went radio silent.

After we hung up, I stood in the middle of my room, phone still warm in my hand. The apartment felt quieter now—not oppressive, just still.

I looked at my desk. The notes. The Excel printouts. The LEAP schedule was taped to the wall with color-coded highlights like a battle plan.

Tomorrow was Week Three. More training. More tests. More pressure.

But at least I wasn't doing it completely alone.

I set my phone down, added a reminder to my calendar for my September 14 birthday planning, and started setting my alarms for the morning—1:25, 1:30, 1:45, all the way through to 4:00.

The routine that kept me showing up on time, even when my brain tried to convince me staying in bed was the safer option.

I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Neil would be gone by morning. Eve was busy with work. But they believed I could do this.

I wanted to believe it too.

Week Three starts tomorrow. And after that? I'd need to figure out how to make LEAP's stipend stretch far enough, actually, to survive in DC. Two hundred dollars every Friday sounded like a lot until rent, food, and MetroCard refills ate through it.

Maybe it was time to ask Ralph about that part-time position.

The thought sat in my chest, half hope, half anxiety.

One problem at a time.

Tomorrow: survive Week Three.

Next week: figure out the rest.

I closed my eyes and let the exhaustion pull me under. The alarms would go off soon enough.

Chapter Twelve

Present Day—

I didn't stop outside the door this time. No standing around. No debating whether I needed to be here. No checking my phone like I had somewhere better to be. Just one step after another until I was inside.

It was technically still a trial session. Shorter than the standard ones, he'd said. A way to get a feel for how this would normally go before I decide whether to commit. Half the time. Lower stakes. Or at least that was the pitch.

Did it mean I felt different about this? Not really.

Dr. Dyer's office was exactly as I remembered it, yet somehow it wasn't. The half-empty coffee cup sat beside his notes. A few books were stacked unevenly, one left open like he'd been mid-flip between sessions. The Virginia Tech bobblehead still wobbled on the desk, likely tapped by someone earlier that day.

Last time, I barely noticed any of this. It was just another office, another space that wasn't mine. But now, I was clocking the small details: the crooked folders on the shelf, the one bobblehead that didn't match the rest. My brain cataloged them like a case study no one asked for.

Why was I paying attention?

Because it was easier to analyze the symmetry of a bobblehead than think about why I was actually here.

"Samuel," Dr. Dyer said, glancing up from his desk.

"Doc," I replied, adjusting my bag strap.

He motioned to the seat. “Go ahead and sit.”

This time, I didn’t hesitate. I sat, careful not to sink too deep into the cushion—comfortable enough, but calculated. Same as before.

Dr. Dyer leaned back slightly, his eyes flicking to his notes, then back to me. “How’s your week been?”

I shrugged. “Nothing special.”

He let it hang for a beat. Not long, just enough to see if I’d elaborate. I didn’t.

“Let’s talk about work,” he said.

That earned a smirk from me. I crossed my arms, tilting my head. “Big topic. Whole subcategory of philosophy in itself.”

He didn’t laugh, but something in his expression shifted, as if he’d caught the humor and filed it under patient deflection strategies.

“You came to DC for LEAP,” he said. “But that wasn’t your first job experience.”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve been working since high school.”

“Tell me about that.”

I stretched my fingers before resting them on my knee. “I worked with two temp agencies after graduation. One handled weekday jobs; the other took care of weekends.”

Dr. Dyer tilted his head slightly. “That’s a lot of hours.”

I shrugged. “Had to pay rent.”

He studied me for a moment. “Most people your age don’t hold two jobs.”

“Most people my age had families covering their rent.” The words came out before I could soften them— not bitter, but sharper than I meant.

Dr. Dyer didn’t flinch. No counterpoints, no disapproving look, just that steady gaze, waiting to see if I’d keep talking.

I sighed, leaning back slightly. “Look, it wasn’t some grand hustle. I wasn’t trying to impress anyone. It’s just what I had to do.”

“Survival,” he said.

“Exactly.”

“Did you like any of the jobs?”

I huffed something close to a laugh. “Like? No. But I didn’t hate all of them.”

His brow lifted slightly. “Which ones didn’t you hate?”

“Warehouse gigs,” I said. “Moving boxes, loading shipments. Mindless, but easy. And no customer service.”

Dr. Dyer nodded as if that explained everything. “And the ones you hated?”

I smirked. “There’s a good one.”

He gave a faint chuckle. “I’m listening.”

I leaned forward slightly. “I worked at this place called By the Flame for a bit. All-night diner. The kind people hit for pancakes and bad coffee after midnight. Fluorescents that made every decision look worse.”

Dr. Dyer’s demeanor stayed neutral, but I could tell he was intrigued.

“The customers were mostly fine. Drunk college kids, miserable couples, families forcing smiles over waffles. The usual.”

“And the ones who weren’t fine?”

I tilted my head. “There was this one family. Regulars. The worst kind.”

Something in his eyes caught the change in my tone.

“They were loud, messy, entitled. Treated the place like their personal dining room. Management loved them, though. Never banned. Never even warned.”

“What did they do?” Dr. Dyer asked.

“Better question: what didn’t they do?” I ticked off on my fingers. “Screamed at another table because a baby cried too loudly. The dad walked into the kitchen—the actual kitchen—because his food was taking too long to cook. When the manager tried to calm him down, he threw a plate.”

Dr. Dyer blinked. “A plate?”

“An actual plate. And guess what happened?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Nothing.”

“Exactly. The manager acted like it was weather. ‘Oh well, happens sometimes.’”

Dr. Dyer shook his head.

“And then there was the kid,” I continued. “Little tornado with no supervision. Climbed on booths, grabbed stuff off other tables, ran circles around servers.”

“And no one stopped him?”

“Why parent your kid when strangers can handle the fallout?” I said dryly.

“And then?” Dr. Dyer prompted.

“Then karma clocked in. The kid ran full speed into a server’s cart. Face-first.”

I raised both hands. “He was fine. No blood, no broken teeth. Just that look kids get when they realize objects don’t move for them. Honestly, a better physics lesson than I ever got in school.”

Dr. Dyer’s mustache twitched.

“I was taking an order nearby,” I went on. “And I might’ve let out the tiniest snicker.”

“And?”

“The family went nuclear. Accused me of laughing at their kid’s pain, demanded the manager. Guess whose side management took?”

“Theirs,” he said flatly.

“Obviously. The manager told me to apologize.”

“Did you?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wasn’t sorry. I didn’t trip the kid. He ran into a cart. That’s on him, not me.”

“And management gave you a choice.”

“Apologize or leave,” I confirmed. “I walked out.”

Dr. Dyer leaned back. “And the restaurant?”

I smirked. “Closed down later.”

A flicker of amusement crossed his eyes. “You don’t seem upset about it.”

“Not even a little.”

I reached into my bag and slid a laminated card across his desk.

He looked down, then up. “What’s this?”

“The best tip I ever got.”

He picked it up, turning it in his hand. “You laminated this?”

“Figured I’d keep it as a reminder.”

His lips twitched faintly. “A reminder of what?”

“That some people’s generosity stops at the table.”

He set it down between us. “Tell me the story.”

I leaned back. “Sunday. Packed house. We were slammed. At the end of my shift, a big group comes in—a church crowd. Polite, smiling, thanking me every time I refilled water.”

“And they seemed nice?”

“Too nice. The kind that makes you suspicious.”

“Were they?”

I gestured to the card. “You tell me.”

He waited.

“Meal went fine. Compliments, ‘bless your hearts,’ all of it. As they left, one guy shook my hand, slipped something into my palm. Folded. Just enough weight to feel like a fat tip.”

Dr. Dyer didn’t move, but I could tell he knew where this was going.

“I waited until they were gone. Opened it.” I paused. “It wasn’t money.”

“What was it?”

“A pamphlet. About salvation. Gold letters on the front: *Your reward is in heaven.*”

Dr. Dyer let out a quiet breath. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

The silence after that carried weight.

Finally, he asked, “What did you do?”

“Nothing. What was I gonna do, run outside and ask for real money?”

“Were you angry?”

“More confused,” I admitted. “Like... why even bother? Just don’t tip. But to package it like a gift? That takes effort.”

Dr. Dyer studied me quietly.

“I wasn’t expecting a huge tip,” I said. “But I thought maybe someone would see how hard I was working.” My eyes flicked toward the pamphlet. “But I guess all they saw was a chance to spread the gospel.”

Dr. Dyer set his pen down. “What kind of job do you want, Samuel?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

“One where I don’t have to put up with that crap,” I said finally. “No entitled customers. No manager willing to sell you out. Just... someplace I don’t have to swallow disrespect with a smile.”

“And do you think that kind of job exists?”

I gave a dry laugh. “Probably not.”

“Then what’s the closest thing?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know. I just know I can’t do customer service forever.”

Dr. Dyer leaned forward slightly. “Let me ask differently. If you could design your life not around survival, but around what matters, what would you be doing?”

I stared at the floor.

“Writing,” I said quietly. “Stories. I want to get better at it. Work on something that matters—not just to me, but to someone else. Build a world people can step into.”

Dr. Dyer didn’t look surprised. “You want to tell stories.”

“Yeah.” Saying it out loud felt strange, almost childish. “I mean, I’ve always liked it. Just felt like one of those things people like me don’t get to do. Not for real.”

“And what kind of stories?”

“Ones that stick. The kind that crawls under your skin and doesn’t let go.”

“Then maybe that’s where you start. Not with a perfect plan, but with what matters to you.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“You don’t need all the answers right now,” he said. “But it’s worth asking: what’s really stopping you?”

A lot of things. Money. Time. Fear. My brain started cataloging them.

“I guess I figured people like me don’t get to do that kind of thing.”

Dr. Dyer studied me. “A lot of creative work happens in teams. Ever think about that?”

I let out a short breath. “Not really. I usually assume people get annoyed before they get interested.”

“Then maybe the question isn’t ‘how do I do this alone?’ It’s ‘who do I want to do this with?’”

That landed harder than I expected.

“Speaking of which,” Dr. Dyer said, “how did LEAP turn out?”

I fidgeted uncomfortably in my seat. “It was intense. Three months of learning things I probably should’ve already known. But I made it through.”

“And the job placement?”

“I ended up at Sanctuary. The dispensary I’d been going to. Started part-time during LEAP, went full-time after.”

“How did that happen?”

“I asked,” I said simply. “Needed the money. LEAP’s stipend wasn’t enough. Ralph, the owner, knew me already. Hired me on the spot, basically.”

“And you worked both jobs simultaneously?”

“Yeah. LEAP in the mornings, Sanctuary in the evenings. It was a lot, but I managed.”

Dr. Dyer made a note. “That’s significant. You identified a need and took action.”

I shrugged. “Or I was desperate and got lucky.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive.”

I almost smiled at that.

“How did balancing both jobs affect your performance in LEAP?”

“Made things harder,” I admitted. “Less time to study. More exhausted. But I needed both. LEAP for the skills and the chance at the Champion Initiative. Sanctuary for the income and... I don’t know. It felt like a place I actually belonged.”

“And which one felt more like home?”

I paused. “Sanctuary. No question.”

The look on his face told me that he had likely expected that answer.

“The question I want you to think about,” Dr. Dyer said, “is this: What would it look like to build a life around what feels like home, rather than what feels like survival?”

I didn’t have an answer.

But the question stayed with me as I gathered my things and headed for the door.

“I’ll see you next week,” Dr. Dyer said.

“Yeah.”

Outside, the afternoon light was sharp and clear.

I thought about his question. About writing. About Sanctuary. About the difference between surviving and living.

I didn’t have answers yet.

But maybe that was okay.

Maybe asking the question was enough for now.

Chapter Thirteen

Week Three of LEAP. Thursday afternoon.

The walk to Sanctuary felt longer than usual. I'd been grinding through LEAP for nearly a month now—flashcards stacked high, late-night study sessions fueled by energy drinks I disguised as water bottles, training sessions where my brain absorbed information even when I didn't want it to. Every test felt like a small win, every passing grade proof I wasn't completely out of my depth.

But the math was simple, and my brain had run the calculations a hundred times:

The stipend sounded like a lot at first. It wasn't.

Rent swallowed most of it.

Food took another bite.

MetroCard refills. Laundry. Toiletries. The occasional coffee kept me functional.

By the end of the week, I wasn't building security. I was balancing on a wire.

It wasn't about luxury. It was about breathing room. If I wanted even a shot at the Champion Initiative—extra study time, prep work, mental space—I needed more than survival money.

Which brought me here, standing outside Sanctuary with my resume folded in my bag, second-guessing everything.

Asking Ralph for a job felt different than filling out an application at some corporate chain. This was Sanctuary. My place. The one spot in DC where I didn't feel like I was performing or being evaluated.

If he said no, I'd still have to come here. See him. Pretend it didn't sting.

I pushed the door open anyway.

Inside, Sanctuary greeted me with its usual warmth. Soft music drifted through the air. The polished concrete floors caught the glow of hanging lights. The familiar scent of cannabis mixed with citrus cleaner.

And there, in the center of the room, was something new.

The square pillar—the one that used to have a piece of paper taped to it with “COMING SOON” scrawled in marker—now displayed an elegant portrait mounted on crisp white backing. A cheetah man in a tailored black suit, gold tie gleaming, holding a cigar with an almost surreal blue glow at its tip. Cufflinks with tiny weed symbols glinted in the soft light.

It was striking. Bizarre. Perfectly Ralph.

I stopped, staring at it.

“Quite the piece, isn't it?”

I turned. Ralph Morales stood a few feet away, his salt-and-pepper hair framing a face full of easy warmth and sharp intelligence. Crisp shirt, tailored pants, the calm presence of someone who'd built something and knew its worth.

“It's... unique,” I said.

Ralph smiled. “Actually, I picked it up at a charity event for a big cat sanctuary. It was going to be either a tiger or a clouded leopard, but the cheetah captured what I wanted to say best—life moves fast,

but we should remember to slow down sometimes. Definitely memorable.”

He studied me for a moment, and I realized he'd caught something in my posture. The tension I was trying to hide.

“You're looking well, Samuel,” Ralph said. “Been keeping up with meals, I hope?”

I managed a smile. “Yeah, Ralph. I'm eating. Promise.”

He nodded, but his eyes stayed sharp. Assessing without judgment.

“I heard from Neil and the others that you're in the LEAP program now,” he said. “Office Administration. That's ambitious.”

“Yeah. It's... intense. But I'm keeping up.”

“Good.” Ralph gestured toward the café area. “Want to sit for a minute?”

We settled into one of the teal booths. I set my bag on the seat beside me, acutely aware of the resume inside.

Ralph leaned back, relaxed but attentive. “So what brings you by today? Just visiting, or...?”

I took a breath. “Actually, I wanted to ask about work.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly. “Here?”

“Yeah. Part-time. Whatever you've got available.”

Ralph's demeanor didn't change, but something shifted, as if he were recalibrating, running his own calculations.

“You're in LEAP full-time, right?” he asked. “Weekdays, 7 AM to 3 PM?”

“Yeah, but I could work evenings. Weekends. Whatever fits.” I tried to keep my voice level. “I’ve done more before. During the holidays, once, I juggled four jobs. This would be easier.”

Ralph tapped his fingers on the table thoughtfully. Four jobs. That’s not sustainable, Samuel.”

My chest tightened. “I’m not asking for a handout. I’ll earn it. I know the products, the flow here, how things work. I’ll pull my weight.”

He studied me quietly. Not unkindly, but with the kind of attention that made me feel exposed.

“Why do you need this?” he asked.

I hesitated. Honesty felt risky, but lying felt worse.

“The stipend helps,” I said. “But it’s not security. It covers survival. If I want to build anything beyond that—save a little, breathe a little—I need more income.”

“And you think you can handle both? LEAP and working here?”

“I have to,” I said simply.

He let that sit between us for a moment.

“Did you bring a resume?”

Relief flooded through me. I pulled it from my bag and handed it over. “Two pages. Updated before I started LEAP.”

Ralph unfolded it, scanning with the same careful attention he gave everything. His lips quirked into a small smile.

“The legendary \$250 resume,” he said. “Neil mentioned you were proud of this thing.”

I felt heat creep into my face. “It’s... thorough.”

“It’s polished,” Ralph corrected. “Shows attention to detail. That matters here.”

He flipped to the second page and read through my work history. Temp agencies. Warehouse gigs. By The Flame. The scattered trail of survival jobs that never quite added up to a career.

“You’ve done a bit of everything,” he observed.

“Yeah. Mostly whatever paid.”

“Customer service experience?”

“Unfortunately.”

He chuckled at that. “Not a fan?”

“Let’s just say I’ve learned patience the hard way.”

Ralph set the resume down. “Here’s the thing, Samuel. Sanctuary isn’t like other places. We’re not just selling products. We’re building community. Creating a space where people feel safe, seen, respected.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with it.

“That means I need people who care,” he continued. “Not just about making sales, but about the culture we’re building. You’ve been coming here long enough. You know what we’re about.”

“I do,” I said. “That’s why I want to work here. It’s not just a job. It’s...”

“Home,” Ralph finished.

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

He tapped the resume thoughtfully. “I have concerns. Not about your ability, I think you'd do well here. But about the workload. LEAP is demanding. Adding shifts here on top of that... you're looking at sixty, seventy-hour weeks.”

“I can handle it.”

“Can you?” His tone wasn't challenging; it was just honest. “Or are you just used to surviving on fumes?”

The question landed harder than I expected.

“Maybe both,” I admitted.

Ralph smiled faintly. “At least you're honest.”

He leaned back, considering. “Here's what I'm thinking. We'll do a trial period. Part-time hours evenings, weekends, nothing that conflicts with LEAP. You show me you can balance both without burning out, and we'll make it permanent.”

My heart rate spiked. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. But I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“If it gets to be too much, if you're struggling, falling behind, not sleeping, you tell me. No heroics. No pushing until you break. Deal?”

I agreed quickly. “Deal.”

“Good.” Ralph stood, extending his hand. “Welcome to Sanctuary, Samuel. Officially this time.”

I shook his hand, the firm grip grounding me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Really. This means a lot.”

“Don't thank me yet,” Ralph said with a grin. “Wait until you've dealt with your first difficult customer.”

I laughed. “I've worked in customer service. I'm ready.”

“We'll see about that.”

He led me to the office to fill out paperwork, tax forms, the employee handbook, and direct deposit information. The stack was intimidating, but I worked through it methodically, my brain cataloging each section automatically.

Ralph watched me work, occasionally offering clarification or pointing out where to sign.

“You'll start with training,” he said. “Shadow Carmen and Ruth for a few shifts, learn the products, and get comfortable with the register. Nothing complicated, but there's more to it than just handing over jars.”

“I figured.”

“And Samuel?”

I looked up.

“I'm glad you asked,” Ralph said. “Sanctuary's better with you in it.”

I didn't trust myself to say anything that wouldn't sound overly emotional or dismissive, so I just went with it.

But the warmth in my chest was real.

As I left Sanctuary that evening, the city felt different. Lighter. Like I'd just secured a foothold instead of constantly scrambling.

LEAP in the mornings. Sanctuary in the evenings.

It would be a lot. More than a lot.

But for the first time in weeks, I felt like I had options. Like I wasn't just surviving, I was building something.

I pulled out my phone and texted Neil.

Me: Got the job at Sanctuary. Part-time. Starts next week.

His response came almost immediately.

Neil: HELL YEAH. Told you Ralph would say yes. Don't work yourself to death, though.

Me: I'll try.

Neil: That's not reassuring.

I smiled and pocketed my phone.

Tomorrow was Friday. Week Three of LEAP would end with another stipend, another small proof I was still standing.

And next week? I'd start at Sanctuary.

Two jobs. One goal: prove I could finish what I started without falling apart.

I could do this.

Probably.

Maybe.

I'd find out soon enough.

Chapter Fourteen

Week Four of LEAP. First week at Sanctuary.

Getting hired at Sanctuary turned out to be just the beginning.

The forms were stacked so high I wondered if I was signing a mortgage. Tax documents, employee handbook, direct deposit setup, and cannabis compliance training modules. Half of them tested my knowledge of strains, THC percentages, and terpene profiles, information I'd picked up casually as a customer, but now I needed to actually know.

The role reminded me of bartending, except instead of pouring cocktails, I was guiding people through their cannabis choices. The official title was “budtender.” I laughed at first, but it grew on me. Catchy. Almost charming.

My first shift started Tuesday evening, right after LEAP let out.

I'd rushed home, changed out of my business-casual LEAP clothes into jeans and a Sanctuary T-shirt Carmen had given me, scarfed down a sandwich, and made it to Sanctuary with ten minutes to spare.

Carmen met me at the door, grinning. “Ready for your first day?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

“That's the spirit.”

For the first few days, I shadowed Carmen and Ruth, mostly standing nearby with a mental notepad. Watching them work was eye-opening. There was much more to it than just handing over jars.

You had to know the products inside and out. Indica versus Sativa versus Hybrid. THC percentages. CBD ratios. Terpene profiles: myrcene for relaxation, limonene for energy, pinene for focus. Customer preferences varied wildly, and reading them quickly became essential.

Carmen was a natural. She'd greet customers with genuine warmth, ask the right questions without being pushy, and guide them toward products that actually fit their needs.

"First time here?" she'd ask, and you could tell the answer before they opened their mouths.

Some customers walked in like pros: "Purple Punch, eighth of an ounce, thanks." No small talk, just efficiency.

Others looked like they'd accidentally wandered onto Mars.

Those took finesse.

"Looking for something to relax with, or more of a focus vibe?" Carmen would ask gently. A little patience went a long way. Once they smelled a few samples and found something that clicked, they'd relax, fill out the paperwork, and settle on the couch while she weighed their order.

I took notes. Mental ones, mostly, but a few physical ones too, when I got home at night.

Ruth's approach was different—quieter, more efficient. She didn't chat as much, but she had this calm presence that put anxious customers at ease. Where Carmen brought energy, Ruth brought steadiness.

I learned from both.

By my third shift, Carmen let me handle a transaction on my own—a regular who wanted his usual strain. Simple. Low stakes.

“You got this,” she said, stepping back but staying close enough to help if I needed it.

I greeted the guy, confirmed his order, weighed it out, and rang him up. Cash transaction. Smooth. He left happy.

Carmen clapped me on the shoulder. “See? Natural.”

I wasn’t sure about that. But I didn’t mess it up, which felt like a win.

The job had its challenges, but plenty of upsides too. Stocking the glass cases, lining up pre-rolls, attaching security tags—that part was mindless, almost soothing. My brain liked the repetition, the order of it.

People were the real challenge. And ironically, the part I started to love most.

Every shift was like a parade of personalities walking through the door. My brain, predictably, turned it into a logic puzzle—how to read them fast without spooking them.

The curious first-timers were my favorites. They came in nervous but wide open. Helping them figure out what might work felt like giving someone the keys to a new hobby.

Then there were the enthusiasts—the scientists. They’d stand at the counter lecturing about terpenes and THC percentages, tapping the glass like professors. I could keep up without sounding clueless. I wasn’t hardcore, but I knew enough. And sure, I indulged sometimes—never on the job. Sanctuary had strict rules about that.

But the employee discount made it easier to keep my own stash stocked.

Tips were another perk. Ralph let us accept them, though I never asked; it always felt awkward to hint. Still, some days the tips stacked up enough to make the shift feel worth every minute.

Most cannabis customers were easygoing and generous, especially when they got good service. Whether it was a dollar or something bigger, I thanked them genuinely and kept things professional.

Of course, not everyone was pleasant.

One afternoon, a man in an expensive suit walked in, talking loudly on his phone. He didn't acknowledge my greeting, just waved vaguely at the display cases while finishing his call.

"Can I help you find something?" I asked when he finally hung up.

He looked at me like I'd interrupted a board meeting. "I'm browsing."

For twenty minutes, he hovered over every strain, asking questions about terpenes and THC percentages, making Carmen pull down jar after jar for him to smell.

Finally, he pointed. "That one. A gram."

Carmen weighed it out.

He left no tip.

"Champagne taste, beer budget," she muttered as the door closed.

I mentally filed it: *Case Study No. 42, subject exhibits decision paralysis masquerading as superiority.*

Ruth snorted from behind the counter. "Every time."

One slow afternoon, Carmen, Ruth, and I drifted into conversation about our old jobs. It wasn't planned, it just unfolded naturally, the way good stories do.

Carmen leaned against the counter, shaking her head as she recounted her time at a high-end restaurant where she'd mastered the art of dealing with wine snobs.

"One guy sent back three different bottles," she said. "Not because they were bad, but because he liked the performance of looking picky."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

She grinned. "Brought him the first bottle again, told him it was a rare vintage we'd just opened. He praised it like nectar from heaven. Biggest tip I ever got."

Ruth jumped in with her own retail war story—holiday chaos, impossible quotas, and enough Karens to populate a small city. "Christmas Eve, a woman screamed at me because we'd run out of Santa wrapping paper. As if I'd personally ruined her kid's Christmas."

Carmen and I cracked up. Ruth smiled too, the sting long gone.

"That was the day I swore never to work a December shift again," Ruth said.

I added my own stories from the trenches, temp jobs that made Sanctuary feel like a vacation. Carmen laughed when I described standing on icy street corners, shoving coupons at people pretending not to see me.

We'd all earned our stripes. That shared history made Sanctuary feel even better.

No micromanaging bosses. No pointless meetings. No soul-draining quotas. Just steady work, good people, and decent pay.

By Friday, I was exhausted in a way I hadn't felt before.

LEAP had tired my brain—absorbing information, memorizing shortcuts, passing tests. Sanctuary tired my body—standing for hours, lifting boxes, staying alert.

Together, they tried everything.

I clocked out at 9 PM, my feet aching, my shoulders sore. But as I stepped outside into the cool night air, I felt something unexpected:

Pride.

I'd made it through Week Four of LEAP. I'd survived my first full week at Sanctuary. I'd juggled both without dropping either.

It wasn't sustainable forever, I knew that. But for now, it was working.

I pulled out my phone and checked my bank account.

The stipend had come in that morning. Sanctuary had processed my first part-time paycheck.

Together, it looked like a lot more than I'd been used to seeing at once.

And still—it wasn't security. Not yet.

But it was breathing room. Enough to stop calculating every dollar before I spent it. Enough to feel like I wasn't one unexpected expense away from collapse.

I texted Eve.

Me: Survived the first week juggling both jobs. Still standing.

Eve: Proud of you! Don't burn out, though. Seriously.

Me: I'll try.

Eve: That's what you always say.

I smiled and pocketed my phone.

Tomorrow was Saturday. My first day off in two weeks.

I planned to sleep until noon, get high, and do absolutely nothing productive.

I'd earned it.

Chapter Fifteen

Week Four of LEAP.

Saturday afternoon, my birthday is approaching, but not quite here yet. The day was slow at Sanctuary in the best way. I don't yet know if I'll make Champion Initiative, but at least I've survived Week Four.

Slow enough to settle in, crack jokes with Carmen and Ruth, and take my time stocking shelves without rushing. A couple of customers came and went, but for the most part, it was just us—hanging out behind the counter, waiting for the next rush that might not come.

The jingle of Ruth's bracelets carried from near the door as she wiped down jars and fussed over the display. She had a habit of straightening labels even when they didn't need it, like the rhythm kept her focused.

Carmen leaned back on her stool, absentmindedly swinging it from side to side, a piece of gum snapping faintly between her teeth.

They worked together like it was second nature, sliding past each other in the small space, tossing jokes without missing a beat.

I was restocking pre-rolls when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

A reminder: LEAP Exam, Monday, Filing Systems & Email Etiquette.

My stomach dropped slightly.

I'd been so focused on surviving both jobs that I'd barely studied this week. The exam wasn't major, just a progress check, but

failing it would mean being flagged for extra help, which meant more time, more pressure, more evidence that I was struggling.

“You, okay?” Ruth asked, glancing over.

I pocketed my phone. “Yeah. Just... thinking about Monday.”

“LEAP stuff?” Carmen asked.

I exhaled slowly. “Exam. Filing systems...”

“You'll be fine,” Carmen said confidently. “You're good with systems. I've seen you organize the display cases.”

“That's different.”

“Not really.” She shrugged. “A system's a system. You've got this.”

I wanted to believe her.

Ruth set down the jar she'd been cleaning. “How's it been, juggling both?”

I paused, considering honesty versus deflection.

“Exhausting,” I admitted. “But manageable. For now.”

“For now,” Ruth repeated, her tone gentle but knowing.

Carmen hopped off her stool and came over. “You know you don't have to do everything perfectly, right?”

I gave her a look.

“Okay, okay,” she said, laughing. “I know that's not how your brain works. But seriously, give yourself credit. You're doing a lot.”

“Doesn't feel like it.”

“That's because you're in the middle of it,” Ruth said. “Looking back, you'll see it differently.”

I wasn't sure about that. But I appreciated them saying it.

The bell above the door chimed. A customer walked in, bundled in a coat despite the mild weather, cheeks red from the cold that hadn't quite arrived yet.

Carmen brightened immediately. “Welcome to Sanctuary!”

She moved to help them, leaving Ruth and me in comfortable silence.

“You really think I've got this?” I asked quietly.

Ruth looked at me, calm and steady. “You showed up. You're learning. You're balancing two jobs most people couldn't handle. Yeah, Samuel. You've got this.”

I wanted to argue. To list all the ways I was faking it, all the evidence that I was one bad week away from falling apart.

But Ruth's certainty was disarming.

“Thanks,” I said.

She just grinned, going back to her jars.

The rest of the shift passed quietly. A few more customers. Some restocking. Carmen was telling a story about a guy who'd tried to barter with crystals instead of cash.

By the time I clocked out, the sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple.

I stood outside Sanctuary for a moment, letting the cool air settle around me.

Monday's exam loomed. Week Five of LEAP started after that. More training. More tests. More proof I could keep up or proof I couldn't.

But tonight?

Tonight, I had this.

Sanctuary. Carmen and Ruth's belief in me. A paycheck that meant I wasn't drowning.

I pulled out my phone and opened my notes app. Started a new entry:

Things I know:

- I can juggle LEAP and Sanctuary (for now)
- I'm not faking it as much as I think
- I have people who believe in me

Things I don't know:

- How long can I sustain this
- If I make Champion Initiative
- What happens if I fail

Things I'm learning:

- Asking for help isn't a weakness
- Sanctuary feels like home
- Maybe I don't have to do everything alone

I stared at the list for a moment, then pocketed my phone.

Tomorrow, I'll study for the exam. Review filing hierarchies, email templates, everything I'd been too tired to focus on this week.

But tonight, I'd let myself rest.

I'd earned it.

And maybe just maybe I was doing better than I thought.

I started walking toward the Metro, the city humming around me.

Week Four: complete.

Week Five: coming.

I'd face it when it arrived.

For now, I kept moving forward.

One step at a time.

Chapter Sixteen

Week Five of LEAP

Looking back, I can see the week for what it was—not just another stretch of training, but the point where everything began tightening. The pressure that had been building since day one was about to intensify in ways I couldn't predict. But that Friday morning, walking into the auditorium, I only knew one thing for certain: I'd made it through orientation and four full weeks of core training.

LEAP's active training phase was nearing its midpoint, and so was I. Orientation didn't count toward evaluation, and Week Twelve would be all wrap-up and transition. The real work—the ten weeks that actually mattered—sat between them. I was four weeks into that stretch now.

Close enough to halfway to feel it.

Far enough in that quitting would look stupid.

On Fridays, everyone would gather in the auditorium, which surged with restless energy as we waited for the Program Coordinator to make his announcements. He stepped forward, his stern expression cutting through the low murmurs until the room fell silent. Somewhere near the back, a chair leg scraped the floor. The HVAC clicked on and breathed cool air across the room.

“First,” he began, calling out a list of names. These were the ones who had come solely for the stipend and the cover letter. As their names echoed across the room, many looked relieved, even pleased, to be released early. Shoulders sagged. A few exchanged grins, as if they'd just dodged a bullet.

“You’re released,” he announced. “Go home, be boring, and don’t end up somewhere you shouldn’t be.”

He paused, squinting over the room as though reconsidering the collective reliability of the crowd before him.

“Actually—scratch that. Legal says I’m supposed to encourage good decisions. So... go home, hydrate, make good life choices, and for the love of God stop emailing me about things that are obviously crimes.”

He folded his hands behind his back.

Nobody laughed, but I think he meant for us to.

“At least promise me this: if you do commit a felony, just don’t text me. I won’t post your bail, and I will tell the officer that I have no idea who you are.”

A ripple of laughter moved through the room. I chuckled too.

“So, my takeaway from this,” I whispered, “is hydrate, and if you do something shady, don’t text the boss.”

The lady next to me cackled so loud at my joke that everyone who didn’t hear me thought she found the boss’s attempt far better than it was.

They filed out with a carefree air, some already chatting about weekend plans.

Next came another set of names: those heading to the Wolves Workspace, primarily seeking employment. I caught flashes of frustration among them—narrowed eyes, tight jaws. It was clear that some had hoped to make the Champion Initiative cut, and the

disappointment was written across their faces. A pen clicked twice somewhere to my right, then went still.

Finally, the Coordinator turned to us—the ones still waiting. His voice didn't waver.

“The remaining participants will proceed to the Lynxes Workspace. You are the Champion Initiative final thirty.”

A thrill shot through me. I'd made it to the final thirty. My pulse quickened as his gaze swept over us, sharp and deliberate, like he was measuring how many of us would survive the next phase of the program. The remaining weeks of core training, the extra challenges, the final three Champions—it all suddenly felt tangible.

As the last names were called, we rose and followed him down a series of hallways. From there, everyone was separated into different rooms based on their program goals. My heart thumped hard, my palms damp against the folder I carried. We were the top thirty now, standing at the threshold of something that felt massive. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, steady as a metronome, though my brain immediately started counting beats, like the lights were daring me to find a pattern. Classic distraction tactic.

When we entered the Lynxes Workspace, I assessed the room. It looked nearly identical to the Wolves Workspace: rows of desks under bright lights, all clean lines and functional layout. My eyes caught on the left wall, though.

A mural stretched across it—a lynx with silver-gold fur poised on a log, one paw planted firmly on the bleached skull of a wolf. Its amber eyes seemed to track us, unflinching. Fierce. Triumphant. I found myself analyzing the symbolism: victory, dominance,

survival of the sharper predator. Probably meant to intimidate, though part of me admired the efficiency of the metaphor. I filed the image away like a mental sticky note. My brain likes souvenirs.

I slid into my chair, the weight of the moment pressing down. This was our shot to prove we deserved to stay. No shortcuts. No safety nets. My fingers tapped the edge of the desk in a rhythm I didn't realize I was running through until I stopped myself.

At the front of the room, Mr. Davis appeared, his presence commanding immediate attention. The air tightened as he addressed the group. For a moment, nobody dared shift or fidget. A wall clock ticked once, loud enough to notice. My brain, annoyingly, wondered if it ticked slightly off-tempo. Not the time for that observation.

“Congratulations, everyone,” he began, his tone more steel than celebration. “You’ve reached the top thirty in the Champion Initiative. That is no small accomplishment. But make no mistake—this is only the beginning.”

He paused, letting the words hang in the charged silence. I straightened in my seat and swallowed. My throat felt dry, like even water would get graded here.

“I’ll remind you,” he continued, his voice cutting sharp and clean, “now is not the time to grow complacent. The path forward will demand more from each of you. From this point forward, your exams will no longer be multiple choice. They will be written, requiring analysis, clarity, and precision.”

A murmur rippled through the room. I caught the edge of someone’s whispered curse. Written exams meant no guessing. No

lifelines. Just knowledge and your ability to pin it down under pressure.

I clicked the cap of my pen without realizing it. Minor compulsions—my body’s way of buying time while my brain started rehearsing twenty different ways this could go wrong.

Mr. Davis’s eyes narrowed slightly, scanning us as if he could already tell who would rise and who would falter.

“There will also be two extra credit questions. These are designed to challenge your understanding and push your limits. Study everything. Leave no stone unturned.”

Somewhere behind me, a chair creaked. My gaze flicked back to the mural: the lynx balanced over the skull, steady and sure. I caught myself thinking how much easier exams would be if we could explain our reasoning instead of being forced into neat little boxes. But that wasn’t the game here. Quiet focus. Eyes forward. Paw planted.

The room went silent, everyone hanging on his every word. I felt the collective anxiety rising like a tide, but beneath it, a flicker of determination sparked in my chest.

“Moreover,” he said, his eyes sweeping the room, “each of you will undergo three interviews. Your first interview begins now, in alphabetical order by last name.”

My pulse jumped. Instinctively, I tried to calculate my position in the sequence. Numbers helped, though they also reminded me how thin the margin for error had become. Every step now was a test—not just of what we’d learned over the past four weeks of core training, but of how well we could hold ourselves together when it counted.

Mr. Davis let the pause linger, his gaze steady, unyielding. “This is your opportunity to prove yourselves. Show us not just what you know, but how far you’re willing to grow. I expect nothing less than your best.”

With that, he turned toward the door. The first candidate was already being called. The room transformed—a mix of nerves and quiet resolve crackling in the air like static.

Someone whispered a joke under their breath, something about not getting in trouble or arrested, and the ripple of laughter that followed was short but real. I almost smiled.

Noted: avoid felonies. Resist misdemeanors. Keep it mostly zero.

I drew in a slow breath. The pressure was real, but so was the resolve coiling in my gut. This wasn’t just another checkpoint. This was the midpoint of the part that actually counted—the stretch where people either leveled up or leveled out.

When my name was finally called, I rose and crossed the room, palms slightly damp.

As I entered the interview space, the air carried a formal weight, but not an unwelcome one. The faint scrape of a chair, the soft tap of a pen on a clipboard—small details, yet they sharpened the silence.

Mr. Davis greeted me with a faint smile. “Ah, Mr. Wright. Glad you could join us. It seems you’re our last one for the day.”

I returned the smile. “Thank you for the opportunity. I appreciate being here.”

He gestured for me to sit. “Mr. Wright, do you believe you’ll be chosen for the Champion Initiative?”

“I certainly hope so,” I said, keeping my tone even. “I’ve worked hard to prepare and to contribute positively to the program.”

They each made notes, the scratch of graphite louder than it should’ve been.

Mr. Davis continued, “In the rapidly evolving field of office administration, how do you ensure you stay ahead of technological advancements and integrate them effectively into your workflow?”

I let a moment pass before answering. “Continuous learning is key—workshops, webinars, certifications whenever possible. I evaluate new software for its practical use in our workflows and collaborate with IT to make sure technology enhances, not complicates, productivity.”

More note-taking. No reactions to read. Just steady hands, quiet pens.

The Director leaned forward slightly. “How would you handle a situation where conflict between two key team members begins affecting office operations?”

“First, I’d meet with each person individually to hear their perspective,” I said. “Then I’d bring them together for a mediated discussion, focusing on common ground and reinforcing teamwork to keep operations smooth.”

Another round of notes. Still no tells on their faces.

An instructor spoke next. “What strategies would you implement to improve overall office efficiency, balancing human and technological resources?”

“I’d start with a full review of current workflows to identify bottlenecks,” I replied. “From there, I’d automate repetitive tasks

where possible, while investing in staff development to keep skills sharp and encourage initiative. Regular feedback loops would help refine the process over time.”

More scribbles. One of them underlined something—no clue if that was good or bad. A clock ticked in the corner, and for a moment, that was all I heard.

Finally, the Director closed his notebook.

“Thank you for your insights, Mr. Wright. We appreciate your professionalism and look forward to seeing how you approach the next two interviews.”

I stood, offering a polite nod. “Thank you. I look forward to them as well.”

As I stepped into the hallway, the door shut softly behind me. I forced myself to stay calm. Five full minutes passed before I exhaled the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

On the wall nearby, a poster of the lynx stared back—unblinking, poised, patient. I almost laughed at the coincidence.

Stay sharp. Don’t blink.

I carried that thought with me as I walked away.

Something had shifted in that room. Not because I’d given perfect answers—I hadn’t. But because for the first time, I wasn’t wondering whether I deserved to be there. I’d done the work. I’d put in the hours. Whatever happened next, I’d earned my seat at that table.

That Friday afternoon, all I really knew was that I was tired, relieved, and standing at the midpoint of the ten weeks that truly counted. And somehow, I was still standing.

Chapter Seventeen

Week Five of LEAP

When Ralph asked to see my notebook, I didn't hesitate. It was Ralph—he was going to see it eventually. What bothered me wasn't him reading it. It was realizing I barely remembered half of what I'd written.

I'd come straight from the Lynxes Workspace, my head still buzzing from the interview that morning. Making the final thirty should've felt like a celebration, but instead it felt like I'd just signed up for round two of something I barely survived round one of. My shift at Sanctuary started in twenty minutes, but Ralph had caught me at the door with that easy smile and a simple request:

“Got a minute? Want to show me what you've been working on? Also... how've you been, really?”

That last part lingered longer than the rest.

Now I sat across from him in his office, watching him flip through the first few pages with that unhurried rhythm of his. It felt strange seeing someone else hold the notebook. It had started as a place to dump odd ideas rattling in my head like loose change—story fragments, metaphors, riddles I was too embarrassed to say out loud.

I'd even worked out that old fox, chicken, and corn riddle once, doodles and all, just to distract myself on a night when I couldn't get my brain to shut off.

I'd written it out in full:

There's a farmer who needs to get a fox, a chicken, and a bag of corn across a river. He has a small boat, but the boat can only carry the farmer and one of the three things at a time...

There's a problem, though.

If the farmer leaves the fox alone with the chicken, the fox will eat the chicken. If he leaves the chicken alone with the corn, the chicken will eat the corn. The fox won't touch the corn, but the other combinations are disasters waiting to happen.

The farmer has to get all three across the river safely. He can cross the river as many times as he likes, but the boat can only ever carry one item besides himself.

How does he do it?

Underneath the question, I'd filled half a page with arrows, little stick-figure chickens, and messy attempts at figuring it out before finally writing the steps out cleanly:

The farmer takes the chicken across the river first and leaves it on the far bank.

-He rows back alone.

-Next, he takes the fox across.

-He leaves the fox there—but takes the chicken back with him to the original side.

-The farmer leaves the chicken and takes the corn across instead.

-The corn stays with the fox (since the fox won't eat it).

-Finally, the farmer rows back one last time and brings the chicken across again.

All three end up safely on the far bank.

I'd even circled the last line as if I'd just cracked a code instead of solving a puzzle most people learned as kids.

Ralph's smirk told me he'd found that page.

The notebook didn't stay a puzzle journal for long. It became a place where I collected story ideas and half-formed concepts—things I wrote and then half-forgot. Some pages still had my real name scribbled at the bottom. Others didn't.

At some point, Neil had slipped a page or two in there himself—half-finished IKY lyrics, random chord sketches, doodles that looked like abstract birds or broken crowns. He'd called it “cross-branding inspiration.” I never took them out.

Ralph paused on one of the later entries.

“‘Introvert Enigma’?” he read aloud. “Is that your pseudonym?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That's the one.”

“How'd you come up with it?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I mean... I'm an introvert. That part's obvious. And I know I'm weird—especially with the ideas and prompts I come up with. So ‘Enigma’ felt right. Like a label that fits without giving too much away.”

Ralph nodded, like that made perfect sense.

A few pages later, he landed on one of the longer story sections—the ones that make up most of the notebook now.

“I was randomly writing one night,” I said before he could ask.

“Just... high and chasing whatever came to mind. I thought of this

image. A normal-looking field. And then something impossible in the sky. Didn't plan it. It just showed up."

He glanced up, listening.

"So I looked it up. What something like that would actually look like. And it was ridiculous. In a good way. The scale of it. The way light would hit it. After that, I couldn't stop writing about it. That's where most of the notebook went."

It wasn't some carefully designed alternate planet. Just a visual that stuck. A spark that turned into pages and pages of story.

Ralph flipped through those sections slowly.

Earlier, when I'd followed him into his office for the first time, I'd been quietly curious where he spent most of his days. I wasn't disappointed.

The office was bigger than I expected, shaped like a triangle, with the door at the narrow point and the room widening outward. An L-shaped couch sat along the left wall, cushions permanently dented from long afternoons of thinking. To the right, a drinks trolley held rows of edibles arranged by color—Ralph's version of a rainbow. It was so meticulous it made me weirdly proud.

Straight ahead stood his sleek desk, flanked by floating shelves arranged in a precise grid. Awards, framed photos, and curiosities lined them. A vintage Sky Raider model plane rested on one shelf, its matte-gray wings marked with faint military insignia. It didn't demand attention, but it didn't fade either. It felt intentional—a quiet chapter of Ralph's life most people didn't know about.

On a lower shelf, sunlight glinted off a silver award. I squinted as Ralph noticed my gaze.

“From my university days,” he said, chuckling. “They told me I had the brains of an entrepreneur.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, maybe too quickly. “Not surprising, though. You probably had Sanctuary brewing in your mind already.”

“Sanctuary? Not quite.” He tapped the award. “Back then, it was all about pot and all the creative ways I could get it. Guess I just combined the two eventually.”

“Brilliantly,” I said.

In the corner, a tiny violin sat on a stand so small I almost laughed.

“Where’d that come from?”

“Neil. Pawn shop finds.”

Of course it was.

Now Ralph continued paging through my notebook, sometimes nodding, sometimes sucking his teeth—a sound I’d learned meant he was evaluating something. He chuckled at the fox/chicken/corn riddle again, shaking his head like he couldn’t believe I’d actually written it out.

A few pages later, he slowed.

His expression shifted—small, but unmistakable. His eyes lingered on a line longer than the others. A faint crease formed between his brows. Not judgment. Not disapproval. Just a concern.

“You’ve had a lot on your mind,” he said quietly.

That was it. No spotlight. No lecture. Just recognition.

“Ready to give up on me yet?” I joked, though the laugh that followed came out thinner than I meant.

He didn’t answer right away, and my pulse kicked in my ears. Maybe he was worried. Maybe he was still processing. Or maybe he was just trying to decipher my handwriting—people say it looks like chicken scratch after an earthquake.

Then he looked up, smiling warmly.

“Not at all. You write really well.”

He held up a sketch of Sanctuary I’d forgotten I’d drawn.

“You draw too,” he said. “That’s rare.”

I shook my head quickly. “Barely. I don’t really draw—most of those are just traces. That one included.”

He studied it anyway. “Still takes an eye.”

“Jack of all trades, master of none,” I shrugged.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

He flipped through a few more pages, brow furrowing with quiet interest. Then he looked up, a soft grin tugging at his mustache.

“Introvert Enigma,” he repeated. “Good name.”

“All the later stories are under that,” I said. “It’s the version of me that writes.”

“I like your real voice more,” he said, eyes scanning a poem. “It’s honest.”

“If I ever want to publish, though, I’ll need a proper story. Themes. Structure. No self-sabotage.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.” His voice softened as he skimmed the poem again. The crease returned—subtle, but there. “This is beautiful.”

I gave a mock bow. “Why, thank you.”

“You can hide behind fiction,” he said, “but not in poetry.”

He turned another page, then paused—not abruptly, but with the weight of someone who’d just read something that made him think.

“This world,” he said, tracing the margin. “You’ve built a lot here.”

“There’s a part that explains where it started,” I said, nodding toward the section.

“The Rings,” I added.

He read.

The Rings

It started the way most things in my life start — high. I was somewhere deep in that peace one night, that stillness where your thoughts slow down enough to actually mean something. And a thought landed out of nowhere.

What if Earth had rings like Saturn?

Not some distant planet in a textbook. Earth. This one. What if you walked outside and looked up and saw a massive arc of rock and ice and light curving across the sky and disappearing into the horizon?

I didn’t do anything with it that night. But the next day I looked it up. Typed it into a search bar — what would it actually look like if

Earth had rings like Saturn? And when those images loaded, I just sat there staring. Something about it grabbed me in a way I couldn't shake. I wanted to make a story out of it. So that same night, I did.

A world just like ours, with this one impossible, beautiful difference in the sky. And the thing that hooked me was realizing the rings wouldn't look the same everywhere. Every place on Earth, every landmark people have already traveled the world to see, the view would be completely different depending on where you stood. The same sky, transformed.

This became one of the main stories in the notebook. The one I keep going back to, adding to, changing, reshaping. No schedule. No pressure. Whenever motivation hits, and an idea shows up uninvited, I write.

As he reached the end of the section, Ralph exhaled softly. Not dramatic. Just thoughtful.

“You've been thinking a lot,” he said again.

He kept flipping, letting the mood settle.

Near the back, he found a folded flyer tucked into the inner pocket. He unfolded it, squinting at the bold text across the top: Media & Communication Degrees.

“A university flyer?” he asked. “I know this place. Good school.”

My stomach tightened. “Yeah. I've always dreamed of going there.”

“So why didn't you?”

I exhaled slowly. “I knew I didn’t have the financial help to make it happen. And I didn’t want to go and end up buried in student loans forever.”

Ralph nodded.

“I plan to do it after LEAP,” I added. “Once things are more stable.”

“That’s a solid plan,” he said. “And honestly? You’d thrive there.”

He stood, and I followed.

“Not having potential is sad,” he said, shaking my hand. “Not using potential? That’s a tragedy.”

I looked away as a cloud passed, softening the light. Then I smiled faintly and turned back to him.

I tucked the notebook under my arm, feeling its familiar weight, and headed for the door—Ralph’s words echoing behind me like a promise I hadn’t made yet, but somehow knew I would.

Chapter Eighteen

Week Five of LEAP

I knew Neil was coming back to D.C. that week, but I didn't think he would do me as dirty as he did that Thursday afternoon.

The Champion Initiative study session had run long—Mr. Davis is reminding us, with his characteristic steel-edged patience, that our first written exam is in exactly two weeks. No multiple-choice safety nets. No room for guessing. Just us, our knowledge, and a blank page demanding we prove we'd earned our spot in the final thirty.

My brain was fried. Overcooked. The kind of tired where you forget which key unlocks your own front door.

So when I finally dragged myself home, looking forward to absolutely nothing except collapsing on my bed and maybe eating that brownie I'd been saving since Tuesday, I opened my door and froze.

Neil was on my bed, happily munching on the one damn brownie I'd been saving.

Not just any brownie. The brownie—rich, fudge-packed, with chocolate chips on top—a nostalgic treat from the corner store near one of my early homes. Discontinued years ago, I'd only recently found some at a small shop near LEAP during my second week. I'd been saving it for when I won the Champion Initiative—victory fuel.

I stared. He froze, chewing more slowly.

“You didn't,” I said.

Mouth full, he pointed at me with the half-eaten piece.

“Technically,” he mumbled, “you left it unattended.”

I grabbed the nearest item—a half-used cinnamon air freshener—and raised it like a weapon.

“Bro. Be reasonable,” Neil said, grinning.

“You’re on my blanket.”

“It’s your bed. I thought it was community property now.”

“You’re lucky I don’t fumigate your lungs.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst way I’ve suffered for dessert,” he said, brushing crumbs off his hoodie. Then he dug into his bag. “Relax. I came bearing gifts.”

He tossed two plastic bags onto my desk.

The worms. The gummy worms.

Not the cheap kind, either. These were the legendary tangy ones from that same corner store—rubbery, sour-sweet perfection that hit you in the teeth and memory at the same time. The packaging was the original too: red, with neon worms coiled across the front, racing each other toward freedom.

I held the bag up, marveling that these weren’t just candy. These were edible time machines—the kind of snack that knew your childhood better than your yearbook photos.

“Where the hell did you find these?”

“Some hole-in-the-wall market near Greenbelt. They had three packs left. Happy early birthday.”

I sat down on the edge of my bed, still holding the bag like it might vanish if I blinked. The exam stress that had been crushing my chest all afternoon loosened, just slightly.

“They taste like rubber and nostalgia.”

“That’s the charm.”

Before I could thank him properly, my phone buzzed.

Eve.

“Yo.”

“Hey. You alive?” she asked. “Or did Neil finally eat you?”

“He got the brownie.”

A gasp. “The sacred one? Call the authorities.”

“He bribed me with gummy worms.”

“Ugh. He’s learning.” A pause, then, “Anyway, I’m coming tonight. I’m between bookings at work, so I’m free until the Christmas event. Might as well supervise you two menaces.”

“To the class?”

“Yeah. Why not? You shouldn’t be unsupervised.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Later.” Click.

Neil was sprawled across my bed now; the empty brownie wrapper crumpled beside him like evidence at a crime scene.

“She’s coming?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, standing and grabbing a clean shirt. “Message her. Tell her to meet us at the community center.”

Neil saluted with two fingers. “On it.”

As I changed clothes, my phone buzzed again—this time a text from Neil.

Messaged Eve. She said she’ll meet us there, already on her way.

I grabbed my notebook—the same one Ralph had read yesterday—and headed out.

The walk helped. The air was warm and stale, the kind of weather that couldn’t decide what season it wanted to be. By the time I reached the community center, I spotted them near the entrance—Neil leaning against the wall, Eve scrolling on her phone.

Eve looked up first.

“There he is!” she said, and before I could react, she wrapped me in a tight hug. It was quick but grounding, the kind of hug that said I’ve missed you without needing to say it out loud.

She pulled back, studying my face. “How you been?”

“Good,” I said, even though the exhaustion probably gave me away.

It seemed like she didn’t fully believe me, but wasn’t going to push. “Alright. Let’s go in.”

Neil lifted a cup of questionable tea. “Welcome to the land of blocked writers.”

I shook my head, but something in my chest loosened. Being greeted like that—being met—made the whole thing feel less intimidating.

We headed inside together.

The community center smelled like floor polish and stale coffee. A folding table held mismatched sandwiches and pitchers of tea. A chalkboard read *Overcoming Writer’s Block* in crooked letters.

I’ve always wanted to tell stories. Not just the ones in my notebook, but the ones that stack in my head like mismatched Lego towers—bright, crooked, impossible to ignore.

I only learned the name for it last month: maladaptive daydreaming. Apparently, some people’s brains build entire worlds when reality gets too loud or too empty. That tracked. I’d been doing it since I was a kid—whole universes unfolding while I waited for buses or sat through classes or tried to fall asleep in unfamiliar bedrooms.

But it never felt like escaping. It felt like... construction, like my brain was trying to build something better, something meaningful, something mine.

I think of random stories constantly—characters, scenes, arguments, jokes, tragedies. Little fictional events that pop into my head like they’re auditioning for a role. I’d love to shape them into something real someday.

I even looked up programs once—creative writing degrees, media and communications tracks, all the stuff people say you need if you want to “take writing seriously.” But the financial debate alone made my chest tighten, so I closed the tabs and didn’t reopen them.

So instead, I just... think. I build worlds in my head. And when I can, when the moment feels right, I write pieces of them down. Not enough. Never enough. But something.

The instructor stepped up—silver hair, warm voice.

“No pressure,” she said. “You don’t have to share anything. Tonight is just for you.”

That helped.

We all sat—me, Neil, Eve—and the room settled into a soft hush. Pens scratching. Chairs creaking. People breathing through whatever block they’d dragged in with them.

Around me, the room was quiet except for the scratch of pens and the occasional cough. No one stood. No one performed. Just people bent over notebooks, trying to unlock something stubborn.

I flipped back through my notebook. There was something I’d written weeks ago—nothing polished but a ‘Sam original’.

It’s a monologue between two voices in my head: Left Samuel and Right Samuel. One dreaming big, the other afraid. They fought over learning to drive, but really, they fought about everything—purpose, fear, freedom.

It wasn’t particularly well-written, nor was it even finished.

But it was me.

I didn’t read it aloud, but as I read it over in my head, the whole thing played out in my memory like a movie that only I could see.

The words existed; the dialogue was contained safely on the page. Left and Right played out in my mind as I wrote:

LEFT: (striding in confidently)

“You installed a doorbell? What is this, some corporate dystopia?”

SAM: (dryly)

“It’s called ‘boundaries.’ Certain individuals kept storming in here whenever they felt like it.”

(pointed look at Left)

“And don’t even get me started on the mint thief.”

RIGHT: (peeking nervously from behind Left)

“Oh! Was it Accounting? I always suspected them.”

SAM:

“No. It doesn’t matter now. What does matter is whether these interruptions are worth it.”

(gestures to the soundproof walls)

“This room’s sealed, so unless you’ve got something important...”

LEFT: (cutting in)

“We do! Driver’s ed. We’re doing it.”

RIGHT: (stepping forward, wringing hands)

“Absolutely not. We’re sticking with public transport.”

SAM: (pinching the bridge of his nose)

“Alright, let’s hear it. Why are we revisiting this nightmare?”

LEFT: (pacing like a lawyer)

“First off, freedom. Freedom, Sam! Ever since we were kids, our dream has been to see the world and explore every corner until we find where we belong. You can’t chase dreams if you’re stuck waiting for buses.”

(softening slightly)

“Think about it, hop in the car, crank up the music, go wherever the road takes us. Isn’t that what life’s about?”

RIGHT: (stepping forward, shaking head)

“Freedom’s great, but... have you forgotten Driver’s Ed? That teacher—Miles? Lane? Carr?”

“SAM: (muttering)

“I thought it was Lane.”

LEFT: (smirking)

“No, it was definitely Miles.”

RIGHT: (ignoring Left)

“Whatever. He called us ‘boy’ constantly. The class was awful, judgmental assholes, weekend plans we never got invited to. And the anxiety! Every time I think about driving, my chest tightens. Eighteen-wheelers, honking, chaos, psychos break-checking us for miles because they don’t like our speed. Why invite that into our lives?”

LEFT: (mocking)

“Of course you’d oppose progress. You’re too busy crying over spilled bleach.”

RIGHT: (rolling eyes)

“Real clever. Maybe next time, try fashion advice that isn’t all black.”

LEFT: (scoffing)

“At least I don’t look like I survived a detergent explosion. Read laundry labels next time.”

RIGHT: (snapping)

“Coming from the guy who thinks skimming online counts as research?”

LEFT:

“Better than binge-watching serial killer docs all weekend like you.”

RIGHT:

“At least I’m not arguing about pineapple on pizza with strangers online.”

(They descend into a full-blown roast battle. Sam watches silently, jotting notes on a pad labeled “Conflict Resolution Strategies.”)

SAM: (slamming fist on desk)

“Enough.”

(silence)

SAM: (standing)

“Right has valid points about safety and practicality. Anxiety isn’t nothing. Left’s concerns about independence are also real. For now, no decisions. If we revisit this later, we’ll do it properly together.”

LEFT: (opening mouth)

“But”

SAM: (holding up hand)

“That’s final. Now get out. And return my mints.”

(Left and Right shuffle out, muttering.)

SAM: (sitting back, sipping his mug)

“For a brief moment, peace.”

(ding-dong)

SAM: (groaning)

“I swear, if this is Accounting...”

When I finished writing it, I closed my notebook. No applause. No critique. Just ink on paper.

Afterward, we hovered near the sandwich table. Neil carefully peeled back a sandwich wrapper, as if afraid to tear it.

“That felt productive,” he said. “You gonna keep writing that Left and Right thing?”

“Maybe.” But I already knew I would.

Eve leaned against the wall, arms crossed but smiling. “Didn’t feel like just a story. Felt like you were sorting something out.”

That stuck.

“I didn’t know where it was going,” I said. “It just... came out.”

“The best stuff sneaks out before your brain ruins it.”

I smiled—barely, but discernible.

As we stepped into the night, the three of us walking under the streetlights, I didn’t worry about perfecting anything. I didn’t worry about the Champion Initiative exam, or the second LEAP interview I still hadn’t scheduled, or the future that felt like a question mark written in permanent ink.

For one night, I let myself be a writer—quietly, privately, imperfectly.

And somehow, that felt like enough.

Chapter Nineteen

I turned twenty-five.

A quarter of a century. Which sounds dramatic until you realize it mostly means your knees make slightly more noise and people start asking about “long-term plans.”

Still.

Twenty-five felt like a marker. Not old. Not young. Just... measurable.

Week Five of LEAP — Friday.

The motel room wasn't anything fancy—just a spot to crash after the night's plans. But the real draw wasn't the room at all.

It was the sky.

Out here in Green Ridge State Forest, away from the blur of city lights and Champion Initiative exam prep stress, the stars finally looked like themselves—no longer faded pinpricks fighting through smog, but sharp and endless.

That was the point of this trip: to get away, even for a night. To stop thinking about written exams and interview questions. To just... be twenty-five.

We'd already done the birthday routine earlier—gifts, cake, the whole checklist. They'd handed me some cash, a couple of new newsboy hats, clothes, and a modest but well-curated stash of edibles. Thoughtful. Practical. Indulgent in ways that made sense for me.

Now, we were stretched out in that pleasant after-party haze—half-buzzed, half-full—letting the night sink into us.

The table by the bed was cluttered with half-empty pizza boxes and soda bottles. A cheesecake dominated the center, each slice a different flavor—a sugary sampler of human indecision. Someone had balled up the paper receipt and left it teetering near the edge. A joint made its slow rounds, orbiting from hand to hand.

I leaned against the railing outside the motel door. The air was cold enough to bite, but grounding in a way I didn't want to resist. Cold always made me think clearly, like brain fog couldn't survive in low temperatures.

Neil exhaled smoke beside me, stretching his arms like he could shake the tension loose.

“IKY's been on a break,” he said, “but we're regrouping after Christmas. Got some ideas brewing.”

I turned toward him. “Yeah? Sticking with the same direction or trying something new?”

“New, hopefully,” he said, rubbing his jaw as if shaping the thought into something solid. “We promised the fans when we started picking up traction that we'd eventually reveal what the letters meant. So now we kind of have to.”

Eve, sitting two steps down on the stairs, lifted an eyebrow. “Translation: you procrastinated long enough that it became marketing.”

Neil smirked. “Mystery builds brand equity.”

“So what does IKY mean?” I asked.

“I & K are settled,” he said. “Infinite Kinetic.”

“That tracks.”

“The Y,” he continued, sighing dramatically, “is where everyone loses their mind.”

Eve pointed at him. “Youth.”

“No.”

“Yell,” Carmen added from behind us.

“Absolutely not.”

“Yore,” Ruth offered calmly. “Like ancient. Timeless.”

Neil made a face. “We’re not a Renaissance fair.”

I tilted my head. “Yawn?”

He stared at me.

“You’re dead to me.”

“That was a suggestion,” I said defensively.

“We’ve heard all of them,” Neil said. “Youth. Yell. Yore. Yawn. Someone suggested ‘Yield.’ I almost retired.”

“So what is it?” Eve asked.

Neil grinned, dragging it out. “Still deciding. But when we land on it, it won’t be safe. And it definitely won’t be boring.”

“That’s not reassuring,” Carmen muttered.

Then Eve leaned over and jabbed my arm.

“What the hell?” I rubbed the spot, half-laughing.

She grinned. “You’re twenty-five now. How’s it feel being a quarter to dead?”

“Feels about the same as twenty-four,” I said. “Just with more judgment from the peanut gallery.”

Neil chuckled. “At least you’re richer now. What was it—thirty bucks and a bag of gummy worms?”

“Thirty-five,” I corrected automatically. My brain clung to exact numbers as if accuracy made the joke stronger. “Rolling in luxury.”

Carmen leaned forward from her seat on the steps. “Alright, serious question though. You’re almost halfway through the core part of LEAP now, right? How’s that going?”

The question caught me off guard, pulling me out of the comfortable haze. I took the joint from Neil, buying myself a few seconds.

“It’s... intense,” I said finally. “Made the final thirty for the Champion Initiative. First written exams in a week.”

Ruth’s eyebrows raised. “Written? Not multiple choice?”

“Not anymore. Mr. Davis made that very clear.” I took a drag, felt the familiar calm spread through my chest. “It’s basically ‘prove you actually know this stuff or get cut.’”

Neil fidgeted beside me. “But you’ll crush it, right?”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t fishing for reassurance; I was just being honest. “The interviews are the real test. I’ve done one. Two more to go. And somehow I’m supposed to study for exams while working both jobs and not losing my mind.”

The weight of it sat heavily for a moment. Carmen and Ruth exchanged a look I couldn't quite read.

Then Carmen raised her drink with a grin. "Well, tonight you're not thinking about any of that. Tonight's about cheesecake flavors and bad decisions."

"Hear, hear," Eve added.

The tension broke. The joint made another rotation.

"Speaking of bad decisions," Neil said, that familiar glint in his eye. He'd been fidgeting with something in his hoodie pocket all evening. "There's someone I want you to meet."

I didn't even pause.

"No."

Neil raised his hands in mock innocence. "Come on, man. You don't even know who I'm talking about."

I exhaled sharply.

"I know you."

Neil pulled a face, as I'd just insulted his entire bloodline. "That's unfair."

"No," I said, leaning back, "what's unfair is you trying to play matchmaker after last time."

He groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "Oh my God, you have to let that go."

"I literally pointed out the engagement ring before you introduced us."

“Okay, but—”

“And you told me, and I quote, ‘That could just be jewelry.’”

Neil winced. “In my defense... it technically was jewelry.”

Eve snorted from the steps. “Honest nonsense.”

Carmen laughed into her cheesecake, shoulders shaking. Ruth didn’t even try to hide her grin.

Neil straightened, attempting to salvage what remained of his credibility. “Look. This is different. No rings, no red flags. Just a cool girl, I think you’d actually get along with.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Define ‘get along with.’”

Before Neil could improvise something suspicious, Eve leaned forward, tone shifting.

“Before you get too excited, let me say something.”

Neil frowned. “Hey. Don’t sabotage this.”

She ignored him, eyes still on me. “Ellie is cool. She is. But she’s got history.”

I folded my arms. “What kind of history?”

Eve hesitated, then sighed. “Chastity.”

I blinked. “Wait. Chaos Alliance Chastity?”

Neil muttered something that sounded like a quiet plea to the universe.

I dragged a hand down my face. “You cannot be serious.”

Chastity. The human migraine in neon sneakers. Known online for pranks that hovered somewhere between “harmless chaos” and “someone is definitely filing a report.” I’d never met her, but I’d seen enough clips to know she treated consequences like optional side quests.

Carmen raised an eyebrow. “Ellie was part of that?”

Eve shook her head quickly. “No. That’s the thing. Chastity hates her. Because of Warner.”

Of course, it circled back to Warner. It always did.

“Naturally,” I muttered.

Eve crossed her arms. “They were friends before Ellie came around. Chastity never liked her. Always sniping. Always stirring something up.”

“And Warner just... ignored it?” I asked.

“Pretty much. Said, ‘That’s just how Chastity is.’ Told Ellie not to take it personally.”

I groaned. “Classic.”

Neil clapped once, cutting through the spiral. “Okay. Here’s the only thing that matters.”

He leaned toward me.

“Ellie thinks you’re cute.”

I blinked. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.”

I looked at Eve. She hesitated for half a second, then agreed.

“Yeah,” she said. “She does.”

I leaned back against the railing, letting that settle.

On one hand, stepping into anything remotely connected to Warner’s orbit felt like volunteering for unnecessary turbulence.

On the other hand... if Ellie was done with that whole circus, why should I let someone else’s past dictate mine?

“Alright,” I said finally. “But no promises.”

Neil clapped his hands together as he’d just secured a sponsorship deal. “That’s the spirit.”

Eve rubbed her temple. “You’re going to regret this.”

“Probably,” I said. “Statistically speaking.”

The night stretched on after that. More laughter. More pointless debate over cheesecake flavors that somehow felt urgent in the moment. More smoke drifted upward into a sky that looked impossibly wide.

At some point, the conversation thinned out into that pleasant quiet that happens when everyone is tired, but no one wants to be the first to admit it.

Neil disappeared into the room for a moment, rummaging through something. I heard the soft thump of a drawer and the crinkle of plastic.

When he came back outside, he was holding a small box.

“Wait,” Eve said immediately, narrowing her eyes. “You said we were done with gifts.”

“We were,” Neil said. “This one was... collective.”

Carmen leaned forward, grinning. “Last one.”

He handed it to me.

The box was small, matte black, with the sort of understated packaging that suggested someone had actually researched the purchase instead of grabbing whatever was behind the counter.

I opened it.

Inside sat a sleek vaporizer.

For a second, I just stared at it.

“Oh,” I said quietly.

Neil rubbed the back of his neck. “Figured it made sense. You’re always doing the edibles thing, but you keep talking about trying one eventually.”

“Plus,” Eve added, “less coughing like a dying Victorian poet.”

Ruth nodded thoughtfully. “Also, less smoke smell.”

Carmen raised her slice of cheesecake like a toast. “Efficiency.”

I turned the device over in my hands. It was nicer than anything I would’ve bought for myself—solid, well-made, the kind of thing designed to last.

And I was happy. Genuinely.

But there was also that small tug of something else.

“I... appreciate it,” I said. “Seriously.”

Neil tilted his head. “But?”

I laughed under my breath.

“But I made a promise to myself.”

That got their attention.

“A promise?” Eve asked.

“Yeah.” I leaned back against the railing again, holding the box loosely in one hand. “I told myself I wasn’t getting one of these until after LEAP.”

Neil blinked. “That’s... oddly responsible.”

“Terrifying,” Carmen agreed.

“It’s not about responsibility,” I said. “It’s about the ritual.”

They waited.

“I was going to buy one myself,” I continued. “After the program ends. After the second paycheck from whatever job comes next. I move out of the shoebox apartment, upgrade to somewhere slightly less depressing...”

I gestured vaguely with the box.

“Then I break it in properly.”

“How?” Eve asked.

I shrugged.

“By sitting on the floor of my new living room, taking the first hit... and then immediately ordering an irresponsible amount of pizza.”

Neil placed his thumb and forefinger to his chin thoughtfully, as if evaluating the plan like a business proposal.

“That,” he said, “is actually a very respectable inauguration ceremony.”

“Right?” I said.

Carmen grinned. “What kind of pizza?”

“Important question,” Ruth added.

I considered it like it mattered deeply.

“Two large,” I said. “One normal. One experimental.”

Eve snorted. “Define experimental.”

“Something stupid,” I said. “Pineapple, jalapeños, maybe barbecue chicken. The kind of pizza you only order when your judgment is compromised.”

Neil clapped once. “Perfect.”

I looked down at the vaporizer again, turning it slowly in the light.

“So yeah,” I said. “I love this. But it might have to wait a little while.”

Neil shrugged.

“Good things aging in a box builds character.”

“Also,” Eve added, “now you have motivation to survive the rest of LEAP.”

“Exactly,” Carmen said. “Pass the exams. Get the job. Earn the pizza.”

Ruth lifted her soda.

“To delayed gratification.”

We clinked plastic bottles and soda cans together in a quiet, uneven chorus.

Chapter Twenty

Week Six of LEAP

I knew we were going to The Nevermore Lounge, but standing in an overpriced café that looked like every other college haunt, I started to wonder if I'd misheard Neil.

After a week of Champion Initiative prep, reviewing office management protocols, practicing interview answers in my mirror, and stress-eating my way through Sanctuary's edible selection, my brain was running on fumes. Maybe Neil's surprise was exactly what I needed. A reset before the real pressure hit.

The first written exam was in five days. I'd been trying not to think about it.

I eyed him. “If this is your way of tricking me into buying a ten-dollar coffee, I'm leaving.”

Neil smirked, hands stuffed in his pockets, rocking back on his heels like he had all the time in the world.

“Just trust me, man.”

Eve was already at the counter, ordering a lavender latte, acting like this was just another Thursday. But the glint in her eyes gave her away; she knew something.

I scanned the café: bright, cozy, predictable. No velvet curtains. No secret doors. Just college kids with earbuds and caffeine addictions. My brain started cataloging exit signs, imagining how ridiculous it would be if one of them slid open into a hidden passage. (Spoiler: none did.)

Neil nudged me.

“You're gonna like this. Promise.”

“Doubt it,” I muttered. Surprise plus Neil usually equaled chaos.

Eve returned, stirring her latte with one of those flimsy wooden sticks.

“You're always this bad at surprises?”

“Only when Neil's involved.”

Ignoring me, Neil pulled a sleek black card from his pocket. Gold foil lettering caught the light, a raven stamped in the center. With a little flourish, he handed it to me.

“Put it in the slot.”

I blinked.

“Slot?” My brain immediately produced five possible definitions for “slot,” none involving birds or coffee.

He tilted his head toward the back. Sure enough, an old phone booth was tucked behind a display of overpriced mugs, dark wood, scuffed edges, and a faint light glowing inside.

I raised a brow.

“What is this, some kind of 1920s escape room?”

Eve smirked around her latte.

“Just do it, Poe boy.”

I sighed but walked over. The slot was small, hidden beneath the rotary dial. I slid the card in.

Click.

A whisper spilled from hidden speakers:

“Once upon a midnight dreary...”

The back wall creaked, then swung open to reveal a narrow hallway glowing blood-red. The air changed cooler, faintly scented with candle wax and oak.

I turned to Neil.

“Seriously?” My inner voice added: *Rule one of horror films: don't follow the red light. Guess we're ignoring that.*

Neil grinned like a magician revealing his trick.

“Welcome to The Nevermore Lounge.”

Eve brushed past me, calm as ever.

“You coming, or just gonna stand there pretending you're not impressed?”

I wasn't about to admit I was impressed.

We stepped through, and the door sealed behind us. The sharp scent of espresso gave way to something richer: aged wood, melted wax, and the faint musk of leather-bound books.

A short staircase led down into what looked like a gothic fever dream. Chandeliers dripped wax onto polished tables. Velvet booths lined the walls, separated by shelves of battered tomes. Ink sketches of ravens and half-finished poetry sprawled across the plaster. At the far end, a grand bar gleamed under dim gold light, bottles stacked high like a cathedral window.

Neil clapped my shoulder.

“Oh, he's gonna love it.”

I wasn't so sure. My brain was already calculating how many fire-code violations this place probably had.

The bartender, a tall, wiry guy in a raven-print vest, straightened his cuffs as we approached.

“First time here?” His voice carried the smooth charm of a noir detective.

Neil pointed at me.

“First time for him.”

The bartender's mouth twitched.

“Then let's make it proper.”

He placed three glasses on the bar, each filled with a near-black liquid fragrant with espresso, vanilla, and something sharper.

Neil lifted his.

“The Black Plume. A Nevermore classic.”

Eve raised hers.

“To Samuel, finally doing something fun.”

I picked up mine, the candlelight catching the inky surface.

“To overpriced gothic nonsense.”

Neil snorted.

“You're gonna eat those words.”

We clinked glasses. I took a swallow.

Instant regret.

Espresso bitterness hit first, followed by a vodka burn that clawed all the way down. A trace of vanilla lingered, too faint to help. I set the glass down harder than I meant to while Neil and Eve broke into laughter.

“Oh man,” Neil wheezed.

“That face is priceless.”

Eve wiped a fake tear.

“You look like someone just canceled your favorite show.”

“What the hell was that?” I rasped.

“The good stuff,” Neil said. “Now you're initiated.”

I wasn't sure if *initiated* meant assaulted by a drink, but the warmth spreading through my chest wasn't unpleasant.

“Alright. What's next?” I asked.

Neil's grin sharpened. “Beer pong.”

At the back of the lounge, black curtains framed an open area where groups clustered around game tables. We took on two guys who looked way too confident. Neil talked big, landed a few good shots, then missed the final cup spectacularly.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Thought I had that.”

I smirked. “So much for beer pong royalty.”

“It's about the long game,” Neil said with mock gravity. “Gotta lose small to win big.”

“Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Eve wandered back, latte still in hand. “Alright, boys. I’ll leave you two to sulk. I’m meeting a friend.”

Neil eyed her suspiciously. “Which friend?”

She smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

With that, she vanished into the crowd.

The shot was still warm in my chest, the buzz faint but steady. Usually, this wasn’t my scene. But I had to admit the night wasn’t bad so far.

Neil stretched. “You gonna stay here or check out the readings?”

I glanced toward the lounge’s main floor. The poetry and story-reading area had gathered a decent crowd. Part of me wanted to stay in the safe zone, keep playing, keep invisible. But another part, the one still carrying that battered notebook everywhere, nudged me forward.

“Actually... I think I’ll check something else out.”

Neil raised a brow but didn’t push. “Alright. Do your thing.”

As I walked off, I heard him call out, “Just don’t embarrass yourself!”

“Can’t promise that,” I muttered.

I found a spot near the corner, close enough to catch the rhythm of poetry but far enough from the stage to blend into the background. The air hummed with laughter, clinking glasses, and occasional applause. Candlelight flickered across polished tables, setting the space aglow in shades of amber and scarlet.

Then a voice cut through sharp, knowing.

“Oh wow, you two actually left the beer pong table? Thought you'd be glued there all night.”

I turned.

Chastity.

She slid into a seat as if she owned it, copper hair catching the low light as she tossed it over one shoulder. Every move felt rehearsed.

Brown followed, loud and self-important, pulling up a chair. His whole vibe screamed, “Look at me,” even as nobody did.

I stayed quiet. No good ever came from engaging with people like her.

Chastity turned her glass in lazy circles. “So, Neil. Where's Ellie tonight?”

There it was, the jab, wrapped in a casual tone.

Neil didn't blink. “What's it to you?”

Chastity's smile widened. “Nothing. Just wondering if she's out making friends again.” The emphasis dripped with accusation.

The air changed tight, metallic. I glanced at my watch, mainly for the excuse, then leaned toward Neil.

“Think I'll check out the readings after all.” He gave me a quick nod.

I stood. That's when another voice cut through, low and amused. “Wow. You lost at beer pong?”

I looked up.

Ellie.

She stood near the table, arms folded loosely, that easy half-smile pulling at her mouth. A presence that didn't need volume to draw every eye in the room.

Neil lit up.

“Lost? Nah. I strategically postponed my victory.”

Ellie laughed under her breath.

“Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

Neil clutched his chest in mock agony.

“Harsh. I don't like your tone, ma'am.”

She ignored him, her gaze landing on me.

“You're Samuel, right?”

“Yep.”

“Cool.” She pulled out a chair and sat, as if the table had been waiting for her all along.

Across from her, Chastity's smirk faltered—barely—but enough to catch.

Neil slapped the table.

“Now the night's getting interesting.”

Good or bad, I wasn't sure. But definitely something.

When the host called for volunteers, I found myself standing before I could second-guess it. I looked down at the paper I'd been twisting in my hands all night—the one scrawled with the title *BBQ Sauce and Broken Rules*.

It wasn't just a story. It was a dare I'd given myself months ago: to write something reckless, funny, a little violent, and actually share it.

The host gestured toward the stage.

“Whenever you're ready, Samuel.”

I rose, paper clenched like a shield.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered.

I cleared my throat and began:

Occult Advisors Case No. 88

We drift down a town that reeks of mildew and leftover curses—the kind of place even ghosts gave up on. The air is damp, sour, heavy with rot.

Mercy boots a rusted can into the gutter.

“Okay. Important question.”

I adjust Apollo across my back.

“Shoot.”

“You can only have one condiment for the rest of your life. Which one?”

I stare at a crumbling post office ahead.

“BBQ sauce.”

She stops mid-step.

“That was fast.”

I shrug.

“There’s variety. Vinegar-based. Ketchup-based. Carolina gold.”

I glance at her.

“It’s basically five sauces in a trench coat.”

She narrows her eyes.

“You’re gaming the system.”

“I’m maximizing long-term flavor potential.”

“Strategic little freak,” she mutters, grinning.

I cock a brow.

“What’s your pick?”

“Hot sauce,” she says. “Also, a wide spectrum. If I need heat, I have options.”

“Explains a lot.”

We round a corner. Low chanting drifts toward us—rhythmic, the kind that ends with blood on walls.

The town square lies in ruin, blackened from battles past. At its center stands a man in crimson robes, arms raised toward a glyph that pulses like a living wound. The air around him sizzles; ozone stings my nose.

He doesn’t look up.

“Fools. You arrive too late. The Ghoul King—”

I shoot him.

Apollo hums as the arrow slices through the air and punches into his shoulder. He yelps mid-monologue.

“What?!”

Mercy’s already firing. Artemis sings, her bolt driving into his thigh. He collapses onto one elbow, snarling.

“You... you’re not supposed to –”

“Interrupt?” I offer.

“Let me finish!” he howls. “There are principles! Rules! First, I monologue. Then I transform. Then we fight!”

“You skipped the part where you survive,” Mercy says, reloading.

He claws at the bolt in his leg.

“What did you do to me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she replies.

I remain silent.

He tries to stand, but the arrows pulse – black veins spidering beneath his skin as his breath stutters. The glyph flickers behind him.

“You don’t explain your powers?” he gasps. “You just use them?”

Mercy shrugs.

"No time for exposition. Hephaestus didn't give us a user manual. Just said they were his newest work."

"I got mine from the Cyclopes," I add.

He blinks.

"Wait. Like Poseidon's son?"

"No," I correct evenly. "The other ones. The ones who forged Zeus's lightning."

He hesitates.

"Oh. Right. That's... worse."

"They didn't explain much," I continue. "Just handed them over and said not to miss."

"You're ruining the structure," he spits. "There's an order to these things."

"You're summoning a corpse king," I say flatly. "We're not exactly obligated to respect your pacing."

The cultist coughs, staggers, then drops to one knee.

"You can't do this," he groans. "You're supposed to give me a chance. It's how stories work."

"This isn't your story," I tell him.

His eyes widen.

"I had to. My brother – he left me with them. After Dad died, I didn't –"

Mercy shoots him through the chest.

He crumples mid-sentence. The glyph behind him fizzles out like a dying ember.

She lowers Artemis.

“Was he about to trauma-dump mid-battle?”

“Classic final boss maneuver.”

She stretches her arms overhead.

“Think the Ghoul King’s annoyed he didn’t get summoned?”

“If he is,” I say, slinging Apollo back over my shoulder, “he can file a complaint. I’m starving.”

Mercy tilts her head.

“Wings?”

“Wings,” I confirm.

We start walking.

Then she pauses, glancing back at the body.

“Did he say his brother left him?”

I nod.

Mercy frowns.

“But that guy was an only child. The file said so.”

We exchange a look.

Then keep walking toward the nearest bar we can find, because even monster hunters need hot sauce and beer more than closure sometimes.

Silence claims the ruined town behind us.

By the time I finished, it spread through the room—not the anxious kind, but the kind that made you think maybe, just maybe, you'd said something that mattered.

Then came the applause. Not loud. Not theatrical. But real.

The host approached as I stepped back, handing me a sleek black box embossed with a silver raven. “A little something for your courage.”

Inside:

- Handmade chocolates shaped like tiny quills
- A leather-bound notebook stamped *Nevermore Lounge* in gold
- A small, worn copy of Poe's collected works

I swallowed hard. Something unfamiliar pressed at my chest, not quite pride, but close.

“Uh, thanks,” I muttered.

A disturbance near the entrance broke the moment. Voices rose sharp, clipped. Heads turned.

Ellie.

She stood near the door, her face taut with restrained anger. Warner faced her, just as tense, his hands cutting agitated shapes in the air.

Off to the side, Chastity leaned against the wall, clearly enjoying the show.

Ellie's voice cut through. "You always do this, Warner."

"Because you make it impossible not to," he shot back.

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I ruining your night by not shutting up and taking it?"

Warner exhaled, dragging a hand down his face. "Look, just... let's talk outside."

Ellie laughed coldly and bitterly. "Outside? So, can you get me to calm down in private? No thanks."

He took a step forward. Ellie spun on her heel and stormed out. For a second, I thought he'd follow. But he didn't. He just stood there, staring at the door, before shaking his head and leaving in the opposite direction.

Neil shot me a look.

I groaned. "Yeah, yeah. I'm going."

Outside, the night air was cool, a sharp contrast to the warmth inside. Ellie stood a few feet away, arms crossed, glaring at the pavement as if it had personally offended her.

I held the box under my arm tightly and stepped closer. "Hey. You good?"

She didn't look at me. "What do you think?"

I shoved my free hand in my pocket. "I think if I say no, you'll get mad at me too."

That finally drew her gaze. To my astonishment, her mood softened slightly.

A smirk tugged at her lips. “Well,” she sighed, “at least you're smarter than Warner.”

“Low bar,” I said.

She chuckled. “Fair.”

The tension in her shoulders eased a fraction. I didn't know what I was doing out here or why I cared, but instead of questioning it, I fell into step beside her as she started walking.

For once, I let it happen.

I didn't know, walking beside her that night, that letting it happen would become both the best and worst decision I'd make all year. But standing under the streetlights, watching Ellie's guard drop just slightly, I wasn't thinking about consequences.

I wasn't thinking about the written exam in five days.

I wasn't thinking about the second interview I still needed to schedule.

I wasn't thinking about Warner or Chastity or the complicated history I was stepping into.

I was just... present.

For once.

But that night, under the glow of streetlights and the weight of a story I'd just shared with strangers, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time:

Like maybe the risk was worth it.

Even if I didn't fully understand what I was stepping into.

Even if I wasn't ready for whatever came next.

I didn't overanalyze it, map it out, or calculate outcomes the way I usually do. I just let the moment exist.

Chapter Twenty-One

Week Six of LEAP

The door of The Nevermore Lounge swung shut behind us, muting the dozens of conversations and laughter. Outside, the air felt colder, sharper. The faint smell of wet asphalt and cigarette smoke lingered in the alley, grounding me in the moment.

I should've been home studying—first written exam was Monday, three days away—but standing here with Ellie, that pressure felt distant. The prize box from my reading was tucked under my arm, a tangible reminder that tonight had been more than I'd expected.

Looking back, I can see this was the moment everything changed. Not dramatically, no lightning bolt, no sudden clarity. Just a quiet decision to follow her outside instead of staying safe in the background. I didn't know then that this choice would lead to everything that came after—the good parts and the parts that would eventually crack under pressure.

But that night, I just knew I wasn't ready for it to end.

Ellie walked ahead, arms folded, still fuming. I wasn't sure what to say. Comforting people wasn't my strong suit; I could joke, even sarcastically, but it felt like the wrong caliber here.

"That was a mess," she muttered, shaking her head.

I gave a half-shrug. "Yeah. I was gonna say 'fun night,' but..." My hand drifted toward the door we'd just left.

She let out a short, clipped laugh. "It was. Until it wasn't." Her voice carried the brittle edge of forced composure.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked, careful not to push.

She shot me a guarded glance, weighing whether to let me in or keep her armor up. Then, with a sharp exhale, she said, “Actually, yeah.”

I slowed my pace to match hers. She rubbed her arms briskly, shaking off the last traces of the lounge’s suffocating energy.

We walked half a block before she spoke again. A car passed, headlights sweeping across the wet pavement. Somewhere nearby, a door slammed. The city sounds filled the spaces between us, not uncomfortable, just present.

“It’s just—Warner does this thing, right?” She stopped, turning to face me. The streetlight caught her facial features, showing equal parts anger and exhaustion. “He acts like he’s trapped between two people, like he’s some helpless victim. But he’s the one letting it happen.”

We started walking again, slower now. Her hands clenched and unclenched in her pockets.

“I mean, I get it. He and Chastity have been friends forever. Fine.” She paused at the corner, waiting for the light. “But he never tells her no. Ever. It’s like he’s scared to upset her. And every time we try to move forward, she pulls him back. And he lets her.”

The light changed. We crossed.

“Sounds like he’s playing peacekeeper,” I said.

Ellie frowned, turning toward me. “What do you mean?”

“Some people hate confrontation. Instead of taking a side, they let things slide. Doesn’t mean they agree. Just means they don’t want the hassle.”

Her brow furrowed, anger easing into reluctant understanding. “Yeah,” she admitted quietly. “That’s Warner.”

The streetlight ahead flickered, condensation on the glass scattering the glow. I shoved my hands deeper into my jacket pockets, exhaling into the cold. My breath ghosted in front of me, visible for a moment before disappearing.

I thought about Mr. Davis at LEAP, how he never made excuses, never let anyone slide. “That’s just how they are” wouldn’t fly in the Champion Initiative. You either showed up or you didn’t. Maybe that’s what drew me to the program—the clarity of it.

“And the worst part?” Ellie’s voice pulled me back. “Chastity knows exactly what she’s doing. Right before the argument tonight, she looked me dead in the eye and said, ‘Have fun,’ like she was daring me.”

“Passive-aggressive as hell,” I said.

Ellie let out a short laugh, there and gone. “Yeah. And when I told Warner, you know what he said? ‘That’s just how she is.’”

My jaw tightened. I knew that move—excusing lousy behavior because standing up would cost them too much.

“You ever notice how people say that?” I asked. “‘That’s just how they are.’ It explains everything. Really, it just means they don’t want to deal with the fallout.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” She started walking again. “Chastity’s whole life runs on people letting her get away with crap. Warner included.”

“Some people just can’t handle not being the most important person in the room.”

Ellie glanced at me, her eyes catching the streetlight's reflection. For a moment, her voice softened. "Yeah... and I don't want to be second place."

It came out softer, almost accidental. The rawness in her voice cut through the cold like a sudden warm current. That wasn't anger anymore; it was disappointment. The kind that seeps into your ribs and refuses to leave. I didn't say anything back. I knew better.

Ellie gave a dry laugh, rubbing at the corner of her eye. "I think I already knew all of this. I just didn't want to say it out loud."

"Saying it makes it real."

"Yeah."

We walked a few more steps in silence. A black bird cut across the streetlamp's glow above us. Neither of us mentioned it.

Then she bumped her shoulder lightly against mine. "You're weirdly easy to talk to."

I smirked. "Not what most people say about me."

She shoved her hands deeper into her jacket. "You know what Chastity does for a living?"

"Considering her personality? I'm guessing it's something annoying."

Ellie snorted. "She makes prank videos. The 'harass strangers for content' kind."

I made a face. "Sounds like a job for people who peaked in high school."

That pulled a real laugh out of her—unguarded this time.

“Exactly. The worst part? She actually has a following.”

“People like watching train wrecks,” I muttered. “Doesn’t mean they respect them.”

Ellie pressed her lips together, nodding. “I just hate that she gets away with it. It’s like she has this way of keeping people wrapped around her finger.”

“Including Warner?”

“Especially Warner.” Her voice was quieter now. “She guilt-trips him if he distances himself. Makes him feel like she needs him.”

“And he falls for it every time.”

“Like clockwork.”

There was no venom left in her tone, just exhaustion.

“So why keep giving him chances?” I asked softly.

Ellie let out a short, bitter laugh. “That’s the real question, isn’t it?”

We reached her building. The street had gone still, the kind of quiet that felt heavier in a city like this. A neon sign hummed in the distance.

I slowed down, not ready for the moment to end.

Ellie stopped and turned to face me, hands tucked in her jacket pockets.

“Well,” she said, rocking slightly on her heels, “guess this is me.”

“Looks like it.”

Neither of us moved. The air between us wasn't tense, exactly—more like something unspoken hovered there, waiting for one of us to name it.

My brain, as usual, wanted to analyze it like a puzzle: define the variables, map the possible outcomes.

She broke the pause first. “Can I get your number?”

I blinked, caught off guard, but recovered quickly. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

I fished my phone from my pocket.

She handed me hers at the same time. We both typed silently, fingers moving over glass screens, the soft clicks loud in the quiet. When I passed her phone back, her thumb lingered over the “save” button. This time, she didn't hesitate.

“After tonight,” I said, sliding my phone into my jacket, “you probably need a friend.”

Ellie tilted her head, lips tugging into a faint smile. “Just a friend?”

I hesitated long enough for her smirk to deepen. Then I returned it with one of my own.

“Let's start with that.”

“Fair enough.” She tucked her phone away and took a small step toward her building, but lingered a moment longer than necessary. “Thanks for walking me home.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anytime.”

She stood there like she might add something else, then gave a quiet nod and disappeared inside.

I stayed on the sidewalk, staring at the door that had closed behind her, my hands buried deep in my pockets.

The night pressed in—the air sharp with cold, the asphalt still wet from earlier rain, the streetlight above flickering softly. It felt like the city itself had paused, waiting for me to move.

I hadn't been looking for this. I hadn't expected it either, which is probably why my brain was already running simulations of what it meant, cataloging pros and cons as if I were drafting an essay no one had asked me to write.

Her voice lingered in my head, every word, every inflection looping back like a half-forgotten song that suddenly came rushing back.

Friendship would be the wise choice. Practical. Safe.

I almost convinced myself that was enough.

But even as the thought settled, something quieter and far more insistent rose beneath it:

That's not the truth, and you know it.

I exhaled slowly, watching my breath ghost into the night. Then I shook my head, half-laughing at myself for turning a single exchange into a thesis on human connection, and finally started walking.

That night, standing alone on that sidewalk, I just knew one thing:

Friendship wasn't going to be enough.

And for once, I was okay with that uncertainty.

I have an exam in three days. The Champion Initiative final twelve announcement was coming. The debate with STAND was looming on the horizon. My life was a careful balance of LEAP mornings, Sanctuary evenings, and whatever time was left over for sleep and studying.

But walking back toward the Metro, Ellie's number saved in my phone, I wasn't thinking about any of that.

I was just thinking about when I'd text her.

And what I'd say.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Week 7 of LEAP

The Metro ride was long, packed, and unbearable. Two passengers near the doors argued loudly about a basketball game. A businessman clutched the overhead rail as if it were the only thing keeping him tethered to Earth, sighing as if the fate of corporate America rested squarely on his shoulders. Across from him, an older woman hugged a reusable grocery bag, her gaze vacant as she stared out the streaked window.

I barely noticed, eyes glued to my phone, scrolling through messages I had no real intention of answering.

The first written exam results had been posted that morning. I'd passed—not impressively, but enough to stay in the final thirty. My second interview was coming up soon. The pressure should've had me at the library, reviewing office management protocols, memorizing workflow optimization strategies.

Instead, I was letting Neil drag me to Vienna for what he called “educational entertainment.”

“You good over there?” Neil asked, glancing sideways at me.

“Yeah. Just waiting to find out what this 'surprise' is.”

“Patience, my guy,” he said with a grin. “You're gonna love it.”

That alone felt like a warning. Neil and I had history—even before LEAP. He and James hated each other after school: once, when Neil had dozed off in class, James had taken a pen and written *BITCH* across his notebook. Small things like that seemed meaningless then, but they lingered, shaping his subtle edge.

The train lurched as we rolled into L'Enfant Plaza. A few passengers shuffled off, but the car stayed crammed. I nudged the bag at my feet closer to avoid a toddler's wandering sneaker.

My phone buzzed. Text from Aaron: *Yo, congrats on passing. Study group Sunday for interview prep?*

I typed back: *Can't. Neil thing. But yeah, next week for sure.*

Marcus replied to the group chat: *Wright barely passed, and he's already skipping study sessions. Bold strategy.*

I smirked. *Got me this far, didn't it?*

Aaron sent back a laughing emoji. Marcus just: *We'll see.*

“You still not giving me a hint?” I asked Neil, suspicion curling in my tone.

“Nah. Mystery builds suspense.” Neil leaned back, looking way too pleased with himself.

I sighed. If Neil was keeping something under wraps, odds were high I wouldn't like it.

Two stops later, we hit Vienna at the end of the Orange Line.

“Alright,” I said as we rode the escalator up. “Where's this life-changing event you dragged me out here for?”

“Right here,” Neil announced, gesturing like a magician revealing his final trick.

I saw it immediately.

A massive banner stretched across the entrance to the convention center in bold, can't-miss lettering:

STAND Outreach

Educate, Engage, Empower

I froze. My stomach dropped.

“No,” I said flatly.

“Yes,” Neil countered, practically vibrating with excitement.

“This is your big surprise?”

He nodded as if he'd just gifted me the cure for cancer. “Thought we could use a little entertainment.”

I read the smaller text beneath the banner:

An interactive experience for those seeking the truth about the dangers of marijuana use!

“This isn't entertainment. It's propaganda.”

Neil clapped a hand on my shoulder, grinning. “Exactly! That's why it's perfect. Let's see how dramatic they get.”

“I swear, you could've just made me watch a bad movie.”

“Where's the fun in that?” He motioned toward the doors. “Come on. You know you're curious.”

I wasn't. But against my better judgment, I followed him inside.

The convention center seemed too large for its purpose. High ceilings stretched overhead, while rows of booths and a neatly arranged main stage dominated the floor. The place buzzed with a strange mix of clean-cut professionals, anxious-looking parents, and the occasional attendee dragged along for “educational

purposes.” Scattered among them were a few people like us, skeptical, mildly amused, and clearly there for the spectacle.

I examined the banners lining the walls:

“Break the Habit, Reclaim Your Life!” “The Truth About Marijuana: What They Won’t Tell You.”

Neil had already made a beeline for the food section.

I caught him stacking a plate high with BBQ sliders, macaroni and cheese, and gourmet fries, as if he were prepping for a cookout.

“Damn,” he said around a mouthful of slider. “Not gonna lie, the food’s on point.”

“You sure they didn’t lace it with disappointment and regret?”

Neil smirked. “Honestly? If quitting weed gets me catering like this, I might need to rethink my life choices.”

I grabbed a small plate and scooped up mac and cheese. “Right. Until we’re trapped listening to a speech about how one joint destroys your future.”

“Fair trade,” Neil said, popping a fry into his mouth.

On stage, a middle-aged man in a crisp suit stood at a podium, his voice rising with theatrical urgency. Behind him, a slideshow cycled through images of empty bank accounts, evicted apartments, and a dramatic downward-sloping line graph.

“Marijuana dependency,” the speaker declared, “is a silent killer of ambition!”

Neil nudged me with his elbow. “Think they’d kick me out if I lit up right now?”

I laughed. "I'd pay to see that."

Toward the back, volunteers operated community service booths, distributing glossy pamphlets about rehabilitation programs and support groups. A few people leaned in, genuinely interested. Others lingered awkwardly, caught in the tractor beam of well-meaning small talk.

"You ever notice how these things act like weed is on par with heroin?" I murmured as we passed.

Neil grabbed another fry. "Gotta keep the drama high. Scare high schoolers straight somehow."

We veered toward the art gallery section, the one drawing the biggest crowd. It was quieter there; the kind of hush that made people instinctively lower their voices. Spotlights bathed the exhibits in eerie pools of light, shadows stretching long across the floor. The designer clearly intended for visitors to feel unsettled.

"This," Neil said with mock gravitas, "is where it gets ridiculous."

I followed, already bracing myself.

Neil and I stopped in front of the first painting: *The Devil's Garden*.

It was chaos on canvas, people twisted into grotesque poses, their bodies knotted with thick vines of smoke wrapping around throats, dragging them downward. Hollow eyes stared out from distorted faces. In the background, a shadowy figure loomed, its grin sharp and inhuman, eyes glowing red through the haze.

From a hidden speaker, a voice murmured, "Weed creeps up, takes hold, and suffocates. You won't see it coming."

Neil snorted. “Bro, you'd think they were describing a horror-movie villain.”

I tilted my head, studying the way the vines were rendered. The detail was intense, far more effort than I expected for an anti-weed gallery. “It's impressive,” I admitted. “Dramatic as hell, but impressive.”

Nearby, a middle-aged woman hugged a reusable grocery bag labeled *Breaking the Chains of Addiction*, staring at the painting as if it were a religious relic.

Neil elbowed me. “You should ask her if she thinks this is scarier than *The Exorcist*.”

I ignored him and led us to the next exhibit.

The Forgotten Faces lined the wall, side by side, in black-and-white photos. On the left: bright-eyed young people, smiling in yearbooks, graduation caps perched, arms wrapped around family members at parties. On the right: the same people years later, gaunt, dull-eyed, their smiles replaced by mugshots or vacant stares.

The narrator's voice slid back in: “It starts with one hit... but what if that hit changes everything?”

Neil crossed his arms, scanning the display. “I mean, yeah, people age. But this feels like they just dug up the worst photos they could find.”

“Right? Where's the guy who smokes but still nailed his degree? Or the girl running her own business who also rolls up after work?”

“Doesn't fit the horror narrative.” Neil's grin was sharp.

We moved on to *The Human Bong*, a six-foot sculpture of a man slumped over in defeat, arms dangling. His mouth was frozen open in a perpetual inhale, chest hollow and filled with a murky, resin-colored liquid. The charred tips of his fingers looked burned clean off.

The plaque read:

DEPENDENCE TAKES OVER.

WEED DOESN'T JUST STEAL YOUR TIME. IT STEALS YOU.

Neil stared for a long beat. “Yo, this is... kind of creepy.”

“Not gonna lie, they nailed the unsettling vibe.”

A kid nearby whispered to his friend, “Dude, this feels like a horror-game boss.”

Neil gestured at the sculpture. “Exactly.”

Before we could move on, a small crowd gathered near a makeshift stage. One actor stood alone, posture casual, dressed like any college student. As the performance began, he mimed an inhale shoulder sinking slightly.

Another inhale. His steps slowed.

A third. His shirt now appeared wrinkled, though no one had touched him.

The more he “smoked,” the more lifeless he became. His eyes dulled. His hands trembled. Unseen speakers layered faint laughter with whispers and the slow tick of a clock, subtle at first, then suffocating.

The narrator's voice sliced through the soundscape: *“Still think it's harmless?”*

By the end, the actor barely stood. His fingers twitched like he wanted to move but couldn't. He drew one final inhale before the lights snapped off.

Polite, hesitant applause rippled through the audience. Others stood frozen, visibly rattled.

Neil exhaled. “Man... they went full-on horror show.”

I agreed. It was over-the-top, but the actor's fading presence had been strangely compelling, like watching someone dissolve in slow motion.

We drifted toward the next display, neither of us speaking. Then Neil broke the quiet.

“Alright, so where's the 'I smoke, and I'm fine' section?”

I chuckled. “You know they're not gonna show that.”

Neil shook his head. “Man, we should host our own art show. Exhibit One: Guy Who Smokes and Still Pays Rent on Time.”

I laughed. “Exhibit Two: Dude Who Got High and Cooked a Bomb-Ass Meal Instead of Ruining His Life.”

Neil snapped his fingers. “Exhibit Three: Functional Stoners Who Just Want to Chill Without a TED Talk.”

We were still laughing as we stepped out of the gallery. The heavy atmosphere eased, but something about the actor's performance stuck with me.

A fleeting thought hit me, half a smirk, half a scowl: *James still owes me for that time he wrote "BITCH" on my forehead back in middle school. Some grudges just stick, even years later.*

This warmed the edge of my grin without ruining the vibe.

This was just the warm-up. Out in the main room, the debate was about to start, and judging by the buzz in the air, it was going to be the real show.

Bud Greenly stood there like a wax-museum celebrity if the wax figure came with a warning label. He wore a smug grin, as if he knew a secret, his green tracksuit perfectly crisp, sneakers spotless. The sunglasses perched low on his nose added to the air of too-cool confidence. His shirt, blindingly white with bold green letters, read:

Just One Hit Won't Hurt.

However, the details were what really made an impact.

His skin carried a faint greenish hue, not cartoonish, just off enough to make you look twice. Veins traced faint, twisting lines beneath the surface like creeping vines. His eyes were glassy yet sharp, holding that unsettling mix of knowing too much and caring too little.

And then there was his pocket stuffed with lighters: red, blue, yellow. Cheap gas station ones, some marked with flame decals or tiny marijuana leaves. A few had scorch marks along the edges, like they'd been flicked one too many times.

The plaque beneath him sealed the pitch:

“Meet Bud Greenly, the Friend Who Never Leaves. He's fun at first. Harmless. But soon, he's all you think about. Before you know it, you don't go anywhere without him.”

Neil let out a low whistle and stepped closer. “Damn. They really turned weed into a whole dude.”

“So... weed has a personality now? That's the angle?” I asked.

Neil grinned. “Yup. And honestly? Bud Greenly kinda looks dope.”

I blinked. “Dope? Neil, that is literally the opposite reaction they were going for.”

He smirked. “Look at him! Tracksuit's clean, shoes are fire, and he's got that 'I run things' energy.” He squinted. “Wait, are those gold chains?”

I stepped closer. Sure enough, a thin gold chain peeked from under Bud's shirt.

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “They made him look cool... to warn people not to be like him?”

Neil gave a thoughtful nod. “Yeah. That's... weird, right?”

Before I could respond, a STAND rep nearby caught our attention, a man in his thirties, polo tucked too tightly, addressing a small group as if unveiling fine art.

“We created Bud Greenly to embody the deception of marijuana,” he said, gesturing dramatically. “People think he's a casual friend, laid-back, harmless. But before long, he's running the show. Every plan, every choice... he's there.”

A young woman frowned. “But isn't that a little extreme? Not everyone who smokes gets addicted.”

The rep's disposition didn't falter, clearly rehearsed. "Of course. Not everyone. But that's Bud's trick. He makes you think you're the exception. You're in control... until you're not."

Neil leaned closer. "Sounds like an ex who won't move out."

I almost choked trying not to laugh. "Or that one friend who 'crashes on your couch for a few nights' and is still there three months later."

"Exactly. Bud Greenly, king of overstaying his welcome."

The STAND rep moved on with his audience, but Neil and I lingered. Some people eyed Bud with hushed reverence. A few onlookers snapped selfies, laughing under their breath. One guy stood staring for a long moment, then walked away silently.

Neil finally straightened. "So, are we supposed to be scared of him? Or just... annoyed?"

I shook my head. "Feels like they were aiming for a cautionary tale and accidentally landed on a guy you'd call for a ride to a party."

"Right? Like you text him at ten, and he pulls up in a beat-up Civic with the best playlist you've ever heard."

That mental image nearly broke me. "Bud Greenly's got the AUX cord and half a bottle of Arizona tea in the cupholder."

Neil nodded sagely. "And that one friend in the passenger seat who never says a word but is always vibing."

I sighed, trying to reel us back in. "Alright. Jokes aside, it's kind of an interesting approach. They turned weed into a character. Not just a habit, a presence."

"Yeah, but they also gave him a drip. Mixed signals, man."

As we walked away, I glanced back at Bud Greenly. Still standing there. Still smirking in that crisp tracksuit.

The friend who never leaves.

I wasn't a heavy smoker, but I knew people who were. Some managed fine, were functional and responsible, and lived their lives without issue. Others let it consume them. Every plan, every conversation, every day revolved around it.

Bud Greenly might've been a punchline to us, but to someone else, he might seem unsettling, almost too real.

Neil clapped a hand on my shoulder. "C'mon, man. We still got a debate to crash."

I followed, leaving Bud's smug grin behind. But somehow, it lingered in my mind like secondhand smoke.

The debate was already in full swing by the time we slipped into seats near the back. A bold banner stretched across the stage:

STUMP THE EXPERTS: The Truth About Weed.

The crowd was a strange mix of skeptics, stoners, and a few overzealous STAND supporters who cheered at every soundbite as if it were a pep rally.

Four STAND representatives sat behind a long table, sharp suits and polished smiles making it clear they weren't here to inform. They were here to win.

The moderator stepped up, shirt perfectly pressed, expression teetering on smug. "Alright, let's keep it respectful. Questions only, no shouting, no personal attacks. Who's first?"

A guy in the front raised his hand. “Yeah, uh... isn't alcohol worse than weed? Like, statistically?”

A blonde STAND rep answered without missing a beat. “That's a common argument. Yes, alcohol has risks, but it's regulated and heavily researched. Marijuana's long-term cognitive effects remain poorly understood.”

Another hand shot up. “Then why are so many states legalizing it?”

A younger rep straightened his tie. “That's politics, not science. Just because something's legal doesn't mean it's safe.”

“Scripted as hell,” Neil muttered.

I agreed. Their delivery was flawless, too flawless. Every reply felt drilled into them after weeks of rehearsal.

Neil shifted in his seat, eyes glinting. “I'm about to make this fun.”

Before I could stop him, he raised his hand. The moderator gestured. “Go ahead.”

Neil stood, taking the mic. “So, if weed's such a gateway drug, how come most people who smoke don't move on to harder stuff?”

A ripple ran through the crowd. One rep, James Eugene, leaned forward, clearly recognizing Neil. “That's what they all say... until it's too late.”

Neil laughed, sharp and incredulous. “Nice deflection, bro. But you didn't answer my question.”

James sighed like he'd been waiting for this. “Marijuana alters brain chemistry. Even if someone doesn't graduate to harder drugs, it primes the brain for addictive behavior.”

Neil cocked his head. “Right, because everyone who drinks ends up an alcoholic, huh?”

James's expression tightened. “We're not talking about alcohol.”

“Exactly. You only focus on weed when there's worse stuff out there. Why's that?”

But James altered tactics. “Neil, weren't you a burnout in high school? Didn't weed kind of ruin your potential?”

The crowd reacted with soft gasps, whispers, and a few exchanged smirks. I could almost hear Neil grinding his teeth.

Before he could speak, I stood and reached for the mic. My hand brushed his, and he froze, blinking at me in surprise.

I took the mic gently but firmly. “If Neil was such a burnout,” I said, steady and loud enough to carry, “then why does he have a good job, his own place, and more common sense than you?”

A ripple of laughter spread through the room. James's face twitched. He hadn't expected pushback.

I pressed on. “You say weed kills motivation, but what about the people who smoke and still succeed? How do you explain them?”

The reps hesitated, their rehearsed confidence cracking just slightly.

James straightened, trying to recover. “Well... those are exceptions, not the rule.”

I shrugged. “Then maybe your 'rule' isn't as solid as you think.”

The audience murmured again, some nodding, others rethinking their stance.

I handed the mic back to Neil. He didn't take it right away, just stared at me like I'd sprouted another head.

“That's why you're my boy,” he said finally, smirking.

James had nothing else. The debate trudged on, the STAND reps falling back on polished sound bites. But the energy in the room had shifted. They'd stumbled, and for the first time all night, it felt like a real conversation.

To me, that felt like a win.

The debate wrapped up quickly. Some in the crowd still murmured over the back-and-forth, others whispering with raised brows and curious expressions. Neil, looking smug as ever, leaned back in his chair as if he'd just won an award.

“I think I rattled them,” he said, stretching his arms behind his head.

I snorted. “You? Bro, you barely got two sentences out before I had to step in and clean up.”

Neil grinned, unbothered. “Hey, tag-team effort. But seriously, did you see James's face? Dude was not ready for that plot twist.”

I shook my head, sipping what was left of my drink.

Neil nudged my arm. “Yo. Since when do you actually jump in like that?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

He gestured vaguely. “You're usually the 'sit back and observe' type, not the 'grab the mic and drop truth bombs' guy.”

“It was a dumb argument. Someone had to say something.”

Neil watched me a beat longer, then laughed. “Damn. You've got some fight in you after all.”

“Don't get used to it.”

“Too late.” He pointed at me with mock seriousness. “I'm bringing this up forever. You're basically a folk hero now.”

Before I could fire back, a woman in a navy blazer approached. Clipboard tucked tight against her chest like a shield, smile polite but sharp, this wasn't a scolding. It was something else.

“Samuel Wright and Neil?” she asked evenly.

Neil's smirk didn't falter. “Depends. Are we getting kicked out?”

A flicker of amusement crossed her face. “Actually, no. Quite the opposite.” She handed us each a card, movements precise and deliberate. “I'm Melissa, one of the event coordinators. We're hosting a college panel next month about the role of marijuana in modern society. We'd like to invite you both formally.”

I blinked. “Us?”

“Damn. Y'all want us back after that?” Neil flipped the card as if it were a coupon.

Melissa's smile didn't slip. “You challenged our reps and brought energy to the room. We think you'd make the discussion more... engaging.”

There it was, the subtext. They didn't see us as experts. They wanted a counterpoint. A little friction. Someone to spice up their narrative.

Neil already looked like he was mentally scripting his next speech. “We'll think about it.”

Melissa was clearly expecting that. “We'll follow up with details.” Then she disappeared into the bustle of STAND volunteers dismantling the stage.

Neil tapped the card against his palm. “Well... that was unexpected.”

“Didn't see it coming either.”

“Guess we made an impression.”

As we headed for the exit, the convention hall had lost its earlier energy. Volunteers stacked chairs, exhibit pieces were carted away, and attendees lingered in small clusters. I glanced back at the stage now empty, where James and his crew had tried to hold court.

It struck me then.

We'd shown up for free food, a few laughs, maybe to roast some overblown propaganda. But instead, we'd been pulled into a real conversation one we hadn't planned to join.

The food had been weirdly good. The art unsettling in a way that clung to the edges of my thoughts. And the debate... sharper than I'd expected.

And now we were unexpectedly invited to a panel.

Neil's voice broke my thoughts. “What's going on in that overthinking head of yours?”

I met his eyes. “Did we just get drafted into this conversation? Whether we wanted to or not?”

Neil shrugged. “Maybe that's not a bad thing.”

I didn't answer. The thought kept looping, heavier each time.

I wanted to know if I wanted to be part of this.

And that uncertainty was what unsettled me most.

Outside, the cool night air cut through the lingering smell of carpet and reheated sliders, and something settled in my chest.

But that night, standing outside with Neil, I didn't know what I was walking into.

I just knew I wasn't walking away.

I had an exam to study for. A second interview is coming up. The Champion Initiative final twelve announcement is approaching fast. And now, apparently, a panel debate to prepare for.

My life was accelerating toward something I couldn't quite see yet.

But for once, I wasn't trying to slow it down.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Present Day—

This was a trial session.

Half the usual time. Just enough, he'd said, to get a feel for how therapy normally worked before deciding whether to commit long-term.

I stepped into Dr. Dyer's office, same as always, but my feet felt heavier today. The carpet muffled my steps, soft under soles dulled by habit, yet somehow the weight of memory made them feel like lead.

Nothing had changed in the room. The bookshelves were still cluttered but deliberate, and the faint scent of lavender drifted from the diffuser on the side table. The soft hum of the air purifier blended with the warmth from the radiator, and for a moment, I let myself notice the subtle sweetness of the diffuser, how it tangled with the distant trace of coffee from the hallway.

Today, I noticed details I'd always skimmed past. A copy of *Mere Christianity* wedged between a philosophy book and a psychology manual. A battered ethics text with its spine cracked from heavy use. And then my gaze caught a small wooden cross resting quietly on a shelf. Plain. Unassuming. Just there, like a quiet witness to all the stories the room had held.

Had it always been there? Or had I only just noticed it because my mind had slowed enough, thanks to the joint I'd had on the drive here, to let the room speak?

I forced my gaze away and sank into the chair across from him, the subtle hum of my own thoughts stretching out alongside the lavender in the air.

Dr. Dyer glanced at his notes, then back at me.

“Before we get into anything heavy,” he said evenly, “just a reminder. Today’s still part of the trial period. Shorter session. Low pressure. We’re just seeing how this feels for you.”

I gave a slight nod of agreement. That was the deal. A few half-length sessions to see if standard therapy was something I could tolerate long-term.

He set the folder aside. “Alright. Today we’re talking religion.”

I leaned back, arms folding tight across my chest. “Great.”

The corner of his mouth twitched—half amusement, half knowing. “Not your favorite topic, I take it?”

I shrugged. “Not a big deal.”

His eyes flicked to my posture before returning to my face. “Then why do you look like you’d rather talk about literally anything else?”

I exhaled slowly, rolling my shoulders like I could shake off the discomfort. The faint pressure behind my eyes from lingering THC made the room feel denser, the air thicker. He was good at this. Too good.

“I don’t know,” I admitted finally. “Just never thought much about it.”

He didn’t react. He let the silence stretch—not awkward, just intentional—giving me space to say more or stop.

I stopped.

“Well,” he said calmly, “let’s think about it.”

I didn’t answer. Not because I didn’t want to, but because the room itself seemed to be whispering memories. The hum of the diffuser, the faint scratch of the radiator, the muted weight of the chair. All of it pulled me backward through a half-life of homes, sermons, prayers recited to avoid trouble, rules memorized to survive.

This wasn’t neutral. Not for me.

He didn’t push. But he wasn’t letting me slip past it either.

I leaned back deeper into the chair. “Alright,” I muttered. “Let’s think about it.”

His posture stayed easy. His eyes didn’t.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s start simple. What do you believe?”

I didn’t hesitate. “That if you’re a decent person, that should be enough.”

He nodded slightly, leaving room for more.

I sat there, just drumming my fingers against my knee, noticing the faint taste of smoke still lingering in my throat from the drive.

“People overcomplicate faith. Just... don’t be an asshole. Treat people right. That should count for something.”

“Do you think morality and religion are separate?” he asked.

I shrugged. “People act like they’re the same. But I know plenty of churchgoers who treat people like crap the rest of the week. And I know people who’ve never set foot in a church but would give you the shirt off their back. So yeah. I think they’re separate.”

Dr. Dyer tilted his head slightly. “So for you, it isn’t about rituals or belief systems. It’s about how someone lives day to day.”

“Exactly,” I said, firmer than I meant to.

His voice softened, but his eyes stayed steady. “Then tell me this. You said before the only reason you’re not Christian is...?”

I breathed out through my nose, staring at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

He waited.

My eyes drifted back to the bookshelf. That small cross caught my attention again. A quiet presence I couldn’t unsee now. I felt the residue of the joint loosening my shoulders just enough to look at it without flinching.

“I figure... if there’s something out there, I hope being a good person is enough.”

Dr. Dyer considered that. “And if it’s not?”

I looked at him. “Then I guess I’m screwed.”

His mustache twitched—something between a smirk and a sigh.

“Look,” I continued, “I get why people want answers. It’s comforting. Gives them something to hold on to.”

I shook my head slightly. “But I never had that. I was told what to believe. Expected to follow.”

“And now that you don’t have those rules?”

I hesitated. “I make my own.”

“And they boil down to being a good person.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not a bad starting point.”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, my shoulders loosened just slightly. The lavender drifted over me, mingling with the faint smoke in my nose. For a moment, the room didn’t feel like a courtroom.

Dr. Dyer studied me a beat longer.

“So tell me,” he said, “what was religion like for you growing up?”

I let out a dry, humorless chuckle that escaped before I could stop it. “I didn’t choose it.”

He stayed quiet, the kind of silence that felt like permission to keep going. I sighed, rubbing a hand along the side of my jeans, noticing the texture of the fabric under my fingers, the subtle shift in light from the window.

“It depended on the house. Some foster homes were big on church every Sunday, pressed clothes, and sitting through sermons that felt like they’d never end. We’d pray before meals, before bed, before deciding what cereal to buy. It wasn’t faith. It was clockwork.”

“And the other homes?” Dr. Dyer asked.

“Well, some were different. They didn’t care much about church at all, but that didn’t mean I got to choose for myself. If they went, I went. If they prayed, I prayed. Didn’t matter if they truly believed or were just keeping up appearances. Either way, I learned fast nod along, keep quiet.”

“So, you weren’t given much of a say?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Just played the part.”

It wasn't a choice. It was survival. Another rule in the endless list, like not talking back, or not leaving food on your plate. Religion became just one more thing to mimic, a survival tactic, until I outgrew it.

Dr. Dyer adjusted in his seat, fingers brushing the handle of his coffee mug. “Did any of it ever feel real to you?”

I frowned slightly, eyes drifting toward the bookshelf again. “I don't know.” I exhaled. “I wasn't against it. I just... didn't see the point. I'd sit through sermons about family, about God's plan, about faith guiding you through life.” My lips curled. “I was a foster kid. What plan? What family?”

Dr. Dyer didn't interrupt. He rarely did.

I shifted again, thumb tracing the seam of my sleeve, letting the hazy warmth in my chest remind me that perception could soften hard edges. “Then there were the foster parents who preached loudest about being good Christians but...” My words thinned. “Behind closed doors, they weren't kind.”

His voice stayed calm. “What do you mean?”

A humorless chuckle escaped me. “The ones who smiled widely for the pastor, then screamed at us over spilled milk. Who made us pray for things that were never coming? Like we could just wish our problems away. But as long as we bowed our heads and said 'Amen,' we were all saints, right?”

Dr. Dyer stayed still, hands folded loosely in his lap, letting the silence stretch just enough. I felt the faint warmth from the sun slipping through the blinds, mixing with the lingering scent of lavender and the subtle tingle in my chest from the joint I'd had earlier.

I rubbed my palms together. “That’s why I stopped caring. It wasn’t faith, it was control. Obey. Don’t question. That’s how you survived.” A pause. “And I’ve always been bad at not questioning... bad at keeping my mouth shut when I should, too.”

His voice was quiet, steady. “And you don’t like rules.”

I smirked faintly. “Not the ones that only work in one direction.” The line felt too neat, too rehearsed, but that was how my brain worked, sorting patterns, weighing contradictions like equations I couldn’t unsee. The subtle warmth in my body reminded me that I could let my thoughts wander here, at my own pace.

He gave the barest nod, like he’d expected that answer, and waited. The way he watched, not judging, not pitying, made it weirdly harder to deflect.

I picked at a loose thread on my sleeve. “After foster care, I figured... why pick a side?” My voice stayed even, but an edge slipped through that I hadn’t meant to show. “Being agnostic meant no fights. No explaining myself. Just... peace.”

Dr. Dyer considered that. “And now?”

The question hovered between us. I let my gaze drift to the corner of the room, where the light bounced softly off the diffuser, the scent mingling with the faint tang of my own lingering smoke.

“I still think it’s easier.” My fingers stilled. “But easier doesn’t mean right.” My brain immediately ran a dozen little flowcharts, easy versus actual, safe versus honest, and none of them ended cleanly.

“So, it was a choice for convenience?”

I smirked again, hollow this time. “A survival tactic. Stay neutral, stay safe. No one could challenge what I didn't claim to know.”

He tapped a finger lightly against the arm of his chair, his only tell when thinking. “And did that work?”

“Mostly.” I shrugged, feeling the residual tingle in my limbs settle with the inhale-exhale rhythm. “Kept people off my back. I could just say I wasn't sure. It was clean. Simple.”

Simple always felt like a lie, though simple was what you told people when the real explanation branched in too many directions.

“But it wasn't really about belief, was it?”

I didn't answer right away. My eyes drifted to a worn philosophy book on his shelf—*Ethics and Belief Systems*. The gold lettering caught the light, shimmering faintly, almost like a silent challenge. My brain, ever unhelpful, started ranking philosophies by hypocrisy. I stopped myself before speaking it aloud.

“No,” I said finally. “It wasn't.”

Dr. Dyer gave a slow nod, like that fit into some mental file he'd been building all along. “And now that no one's forcing you to believe anything... do you still feel the same way?”

I pressed my tongue against my teeth, letting the question roll around. Did I? My thoughts scattered like dust motes in sunlight, branching like subway lines, none leading to the same place. Saying I don't know felt too exposed, even if it was most accurate.

So, I nodded once. “Yeah.”

Dr. Dyer didn't argue or push. He just let the conversation sit there, letting my words echo back, giving me room to feel them settle.

He let a beat of silence pass before speaking again, his tone steady, never rushed.

“You've said before that you held back from committing because of trust. Can I ask what the real reason you're not Christian?”

I exhaled, pressing my thumb into my knee. The warmth of the office chair seeped through my jeans, grounding me. “Because I don't trust people who say they are.”

Dr. Dyer didn't flinch. He just watched, steady, patient—like he already knew there was more.

I rubbed the back of my neck and dropped my hands into my lap. “I don't have a problem with faith itself. I mean, I don't know what's out there, but if believing in something makes life easier for people, then fine. Whatever works. As long as it's not weaponized.”

He rested his elbows on the armrests. “But?”

“But people use it as a cover,” I said, shaking my head. “I saw it too many times in foster care. Families putting on a show, acting righteous in public, but behind closed doors? They were just as selfish, just as cruel. Maybe worse.”

He didn't interrupt. Good. If he had, I might've shut down.

“Some homes made religion the centerpiece. Prayers at dinner, church on Sundays, Bible verses hanging crooked on every wall. They'd smile at me, say I was blessed to be there.” A humorless chuckle escaped me, the dry sound mingling with the faint lavender in the room. “Then they'd remind me, behind closed doors, how lucky I was even to have a bed.”

Dr. Dyer's expression stayed level, neither pitying nor distant. Just present.

“There were rules. So many damn rules. What I could say, how I should act, what I had to pretend to believe. One foster dad told me, 'Doubt is dangerous.' Like if I didn't swallow everything whole, I was defective.” I scoffed. “And meanwhile, these same people lied, cheated, gossiped about neighbors, yelled at cashiers, cut people off in traffic while flipping the bird.”

Dr. Dyer's breath came out quietly, almost like a thought slipping free. “That must've been... a lot to carry.”

I looked at him, the chair soft under me, the residual tingle reminding me of calm edges I rarely felt. “A lot? Sure. But you know what it really was? Infuriating. Watching people act holier-than-thou because they had a cross around their neck while treating others like garbage.”

His slight nod said he understood real, not performative, not patronizing.

I drew a slow breath, running a hand down my face. “Faith isn't the problem. It's the people who claim to have it.”

“I can see why you feel that way,” he said, tone steady but not pressing. He let the pause linger just long enough before adding, “You've lived through so many versions of what people call faith. That changes how anyone would see it.”

And somehow, that felt like the most honest thing anyone had said to me in years.

The room went quiet again, not uncomfortable, just the kind of silence that lets words settle instead of demanding more.

“So, what now?” I asked.

Dr. Dyer tilted his head, folding his hands. “That's up to you.”

I let out a short breath, almost a laugh, tinged with lingering warmth. “Classic therapist answer.”

He smiled faintly. “Then let me put it another way. You said you don't know what you believe. So, what's next?”

I didn't answer right away. Admitting I didn't know felt too raw, like handing over a piece of myself I wasn't ready to let go of.

“I just... try to be a good person,” I said finally, letting the room, the warmth, the residual haze, and the lavender all anchor me. “That's gotta count for something.”

Dr. Dyer's eyes stayed on mine. “Maybe that's enough.”

The words hung there soft, but solid.

And for the first time, I let myself believe they could be true.

Because I wasn't waiting for some lightning-strike moment, or for answers to drop into my lap, or for the pieces of my life to click into a perfect picture, part of me wanted that kind of symmetry, everything neatly aligned, no loose ends, but I knew life didn't work like equations.

I just wanted to stop feeling wrong for not knowing.

And no one, not Dr. Dyer, not anyone, was telling me I had to figure it out today. That felt almost alien. Usually, there's an implied deadline, an invisible stopwatch ticking somewhere in the background. Here, there was only quiet permission to think without solving.

That realization, small and unremarkable, felt heavier than I expected. But also lighter somehow, like setting down a book I'd been pretending to understand just so no one would ask questions.

I stood, sliding my hands into my pockets. Dr. Dyer mirrored the movement with a slow nod.

“Same time next week?” he asked.

I hesitated, then agreed. “Yeah.”

As I walked toward the door, the floorboards creaked softly. Light from the hallway spilled into the room, muted and warm. The air smelled faintly of old books and coffee, familiar, grounding. My brain filed it away, like I'd need to remember it later, some leftover habit of cataloging details.

I didn't have an answer.

But for the first time, I wasn't in a rush to find one.

And maybe that was the answer, at least for now.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Week 7 of LEAP

Mail had arrived.

Dear Mr. Morales,

I hope this letter finds you well. Although your absence was felt, the spirited exchanges at our recent outreach event left a lasting impression.

As a follow-up, I'm inviting you and your associates, Samuel Wright and Neil Coleman, to the upcoming Public Forum Debate at Crescent River University. This annual event offers a platform for robust discussion on cannabis policy, something I'm sure you'll find both relevant and engaging.

The format includes alternating speeches, rebuttals, and a cross-examination session.

I trust Samuel and Neil will be prepared to defend their positions vigorously, particularly given the compelling evidence we intend to present. It promises to be an illuminating experience for all, provided everyone is ready to engage with the facts.

We sincerely hope Sanctuary will attend. Your voices would enrich the dialogue.

Looking forward to your response.

Best regards,

Harlan Thorne

Ralph lowered the paper with an almost theatrical sigh, then gave his head a slow shake.

“You wouldn't believe how I got this thing. Some guy with a bowl cut just strolled up, handed it to me like it was the nuclear launch codes, and then bowed like I was Queen Elizabeth accepting a peace treaty. I half expected a trumpet fanfare and a red carpet.”

The room cracked up, laughter bouncing off the walls of Sanctuary's back office. Sunday light filtered through the windows, casting everything in warm amber.

The smell of cannabis mingled with fresh coffee from the machine. My eyes lingered on Eve, arms crossed, the slight tilt of her head hinting at subtle approval, a skill honed at Sterling Feast; she always knew when to step in quietly.

I leaned against the wall, arms folded, trying to process it all. Friday's STAND event had been... a lot. And now, apparently, they wanted a rematch. Four weeks to prepare arguments, memorize facts, and somehow avoid embarrassing myself in front of a university audience.

Oh, and my second Champion Initiative interview was Friday – second week of October. Final twelve announcement? Maybe as early as next week. Perfect timing.

My brain was already running calculations: debate prep hours, LEAP study time, Sanctuary shifts, sleep... the math didn't add up.

Eve, arms folded, arched an eyebrow at Neil from her spot on the couch.

“Didn't I warn you about going to one of their events?”

Neil leaned back in his chair, fingers laced behind his head.

“Correction: you told me not to go alone. So, I brought Samuel. Loophole achieved.”

I couldn't help a flicker of pride at being included, though nerves hummed underneath. This wasn't just Neil's mess anymore. I'd grabbed that mic. I'd challenged James Eugene in front of a crowd. I'd made myself a target.

Eve shook her head, smiling despite herself.

“Classic Neil. You'll end up in a courtroom one day, probably winning.”

Carmen perched forward from her chair, elbows on her knees.

“So? Spill. What really went down?”

Neil was ready. He launched into his retelling with the glee of someone who knew he had a story worth telling.

“First of all, Bud Greenly showed up, yes, *that* Bud Greenly. We got photos. Then James tried quoting a dusty 1992 study, thinking he'd sound smart. I pulled up the retraction on my phone, waved it right in his face. His eyes went blank like someone yanked the plug mid-sentence.”

Even Ralph slapped his knee, laughing.

I cleared my throat, softer than I meant to.

“I said something too. They were trashing Neil, and I couldn't just sit there. Had to step in.”

The memory warmed and embarrassed me at the same time. I wasn't used to being the one who spoke up. That was usually someone else's job.

Ralph grinned widely.

“Now that's what I like to hear, Samuel, standing tall in the lion's den. I would've paid to see it.”

Eve's expression softened. Her gaze caught mine, steady and kind.

“That took courage. You should be proud of yourself.”

The words settled uncomfortably. I repositioned myself, not sure how to respond. Praise always felt like a setup for disappointment.

“Thanks,” I managed.

Ralph straightened, slipping into what I'd come to think of as his mentor mode, the version of him that had probably run successful business pitches and convinced investors to take chances.

“Alright. So, we've got four weeks. That's plenty of time if we're smart about it.” He pointed at the letter. “This Harlan Thorne character, he's not inviting you to have a friendly chat. He wants a show. That means we need to be prepared.”

“Define prepared,” Neil said, though his grin suggested he was already enjoying this.

“Speeches,” Ralph said, ticking off fingers. “Opening statements, closing arguments, responses to their common talking points. You need to know your material cold.”

Carmen pulled out her phone. “Ruth and I can help with the cannabis facts. Studies, statistics, legal precedents. We'll drill you until you can cite sources in your sleep.”

Ruth rested a hand on Neil's shoulder. “We've got your backs. Both of you. This is a team thing, and we're not letting you walk in unarmed.”

I felt something loosen in my chest, gratitude mixed with anxiety. They were offering help, but that meant this was really happening. No backing out now.

“What about format?” I asked. “The letter mentioned alternating speeches and cross-examination. That's... vague.”

Ralph shot a quick thumbs-up. “Good catch. I'll reach out to the university and get specifics. We need to know exactly what we're walking into.”

“Time limits per speech?” Eve added. “Number of rebuttals allowed? Whether there's a moderator or if it's free-for-all?”

“All of that,” Ralph confirmed. “I'll get answers this week.”

Neil glanced at me. “You good with this? I mean, I dragged you to that event, but you don't have to do the debate if”

“I'm in,” I said, cutting him off.

The words came out more certain than I felt. But I meant them. James Eugene had tried to tear Neil down with personal attacks, and I'd seen the flash of hurt in my friend's eyes before he covered it with bravado. If they wanted another round, fine. We'd give them one.

Ralph stood and moved to the whiteboard mounted on the back wall. He grabbed a marker.

“Alright. Let's start strategizing.”

He drew a line down the middle, labeling one side “Our Arguments” and the other “Their Arguments.”

“First rule of debate,” Ralph said, capping the marker with a click. “Know your opponent's position better than they do. That way, you're never surprised.”

“So, we're predicting what they'll say?” I asked.

“Exactly. STAND's talking points are pretty consistent. Gateway drug theory, cognitive impairment studies, addiction potential, impact on youth.” Ralph wrote each one on the board. “What else?”

“Loss of motivation,” Carmen offered. “They love that one.”

“Economic concerns,” Ruth added. “Black market funding, workplace safety.”

“Moral decay,” Neil said with a smirk. “Can't forget the 'think of the children' angle.”

Ralph tipped his head as he finished adding each point. The list grew: twelve common arguments STAND always deployed.

“Now,” Ralph said, turning back to us. “For each of these, we need a response. Not just defensive, proactive. We control the narrative.”

He pointed at the gateway drug entry. “Samuel, you took this one on Friday. Want to tackle it again?”

I straightened. “Gateway theory is flawed because correlation doesn't equal causation. Most people who use marijuana don't progress to harder drugs. The real gateway is usually alcohol or prescription medication, but those don't fit STAND's agenda.”

Ralph smiled. “Good. But tighten it. Debates reward concise answers.”

He rewrote my response in bullet points:

- Gateway theory = correlation, not causation
- 90%+ of marijuana users never use hard drugs
- Real gateways: alcohol, prescriptions (both legal)
- Question: Why focus on marijuana?

“See?” Ralph said. “Same argument, half the words, twice the impact.”

For the next hour, we worked through the list. Ralph would present a STAND talking point, and Neil or I would craft a response. Carmen and Ruth fact-checked us in real time, pulling up studies on their phones, correcting statistics, and strengthening weak points.

My phone buzzed during a break. Text from Aaron: *Dude, interview prep Tuesday night. You coming?*

I typed back: *Yeah. Definitely.*

Marcus chimed in: *Better not skip again, Wright. You're hanging by a thread.*

I smirked. *The thread's stronger than you think.*

Aaron sent a laughing emoji. Then: *Seriously though, we got you. Final 12 announcement probably next week. You ready?*

Was I? I'd passed the first exam barely. The second interview was on Friday. And now I had this debate in four weeks, which meant every evening would be split between LEAP prep, debate prep, and Sanctuary shifts.

I was already stretched thin. This would push me to the edge.

But I couldn't say no. Not to Neil. Not after he'd stood up on Friday and I'd seen what it cost him.

Ready as I'll ever be, I typed.

“Samuel?” Ralph's voice pulled me back. “You with us?”

“Yeah, sorry.” I pocketed my phone. “Just LEAP stuff.”

Ralph looked like he understood, but was still concerned. “How's that going?”

“Second interview. Final twelve announcement soon. First exam... I passed, but not by much.”

“So, you're juggling LEAP, Sanctuary, and now debate prep.” Ralph leaned against the desk. “That's a lot.”

“I can handle it,” I said automatically.

Eve shot me a look. “Can you?”

The question landed heavier than I expected. Could I? Realistically?

“I don't have a choice,” I said finally. “I'm not quitting LEAP. I'm not letting Neil down. And I'm not giving up Sanctuary. So yeah. I'll handle it.”

Ralph studied me like a zoo exhibit. “Alright. But we're going to be smart about this. No all-nighters. No burning out before the debate.”

“Agreed,” Carmen said firmly. “We prep efficiently. Quality over quantity.”

“And we divide the work,” Ruth added. “You two focus on delivery. We'll handle research.”

Neil clapped his hands together. “See? Teamwork.”

Ralph turned back to the whiteboard. “Alright, opening statements. Neil, you're going first. Samuel, you'll follow. We need hooks, something that grabs attention in the first ten seconds.”

“Like what?” Neil asked.

“Like...” Ralph tapped the marker against his palm, thinking.

“What if you opened with a question? Something that forces the audience to confront their assumptions?”

“How much do you really know about marijuana?” I offered.

Ralph pointed at me. “Yes. But make it personal. 'How much do you really know about marijuana? And where did you learn it?'”

“Yeah. That works. Makes people question their sources.”

“Exactly,” Ralph said. “And then you pivot: 'Because if your source is STAND, you're not getting the full story.'”

We spent another thirty minutes crafting opening statements. Ralph pushed us to be sharp, confident, and precise. No rambling. No hedging. Own the space.

By the time we broke, my head was buzzing half from information overload, half from adrenaline.

The door creaked, and Ellie stepped through. She had a way of changing the air in a roomlike opening a window on a warm day.

“Hey, everyone!” she said brightly, her smile lighting up the space as her gaze landed on me.

“Ready to head out, Samuel?”

I blinked, momentarily disoriented. Sunday. Movie. We'd planned this yesterday.

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing my jacket from the back of the chair. My body moved automatically, but my brain was still half in debate mode.

“We're catching that new indie horror film.”

Neil smirked. “If you get scared, just hold onto Ellie.”

Ruth grinned. “And try not to scream louder than the movie this time.”

I shot them both a middle finger over my shoulder as Ellie and I walked out, their laughter chasing us down the hall.

Outside, the late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot. Ellie walked beside me, close enough that our arms occasionally brushed.

“Big meeting?” she asked.

“STAND invited us to a debate. Four weeks.”

She raised her eyebrows. “That's soon.”

“Tell me about it.” I exhaled. “And I've got my second LEAP interview Friday – Oct 10, plus finals announcement coming, plus Sanctuary shifts, plus”

“Plus, you're going to burn out if you don't breathe,” she said, bumping her shoulder against mine.

I looked at her. “Breathing's overrated.”

“Says the guy who looks like he hasn't slept in a week.”

“Four days, actually. Let's be accurate.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Tonight? No LEAP. No debate prep. Just horror movies and whatever overpriced snacks the theater's pushing.”

Something in me loosened. “Deal.”

As we walked toward the Metro station, the debate letter still echoed in my head. Harlan Thorne's formal invitation. Ralph's whiteboard strategies. The weight of four weeks.

But right now, with Ellie beside me and the evening stretching ahead, I let myself think about something else.

Monsters on screen were easier than the ones in real life.

And for a few hours, I could pretend I wasn't preparing for both.

Six months later, I'd look back on this Sunday as the moment the pieces started falling into place, debate, LEAP, relationships, all converging toward an ending I couldn't see coming. Dr. Dyer would ask if I felt overwhelmed.

I'd tell him I felt alive.

But that afternoon, walking toward the Metro with Ellie's laughter in my ears and Ralph's strategies in my head, I just felt like I was finally doing something that mattered.

Even if I had no idea how it would all end.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Week 8 of LEAP

I barely noticed the sign's buzz until it synced with the static in my chest. The sidewalk outside the indie theater was nearly empty, with just a few people lingering near the posters. The film had ended only minutes ago; no time skip, no buffer. Just credits rolling, and us stepping straight into the night.

I zipped my hoodie halfway and glanced at Ellie.

“Hard to believe a week ago we were plotting how to roast STAND,” I said. “Now we're out here pretending we're film critics.”

Ellie shrugged. “They came to my school once. Handed out tiny booklets and dirty looks.”

I snorted. “Yeah, that tracks. Their whole vibe is 'judgmental aunt at Thanksgiving.’”

“They made us sit through this ancient slideshow,” she said. “I swear one of the graphics was a JPEG from 2003.”

I laughed, kicking at a pebble. “Cutting-edge propaganda.”

“Still better than the video they showed my friend's school. Some guy dramatically walking through smoke, narrating about 'lost potential.’”

“Oh, God. Trench coat?”

“Worse. Buttoned polo. Popped collar.”

We both cracked up the kind of laughter that unspools slowly, easily, unforced.

The debate prep session from earlier still hummed in the back of my mind: Ralph's whiteboard strategies, Carmen's fact-checking, the weight of three weeks until we'd face STAND again. But out here, walking beside Ellie with the cool night air cutting through the day's stress, it all felt distant.

My second interview was on Friday, Oct 10. Ten days. The final twelve announcement was coming, maybe next week, maybe the week after. Aaron and Marcus were probably studying right now, getting ahead while I was out watching horror movies.

But I'd made a choice: tonight wasn't about LEAP or debates or juggling responsibilities. Tonight was about this.

“So,” I said, shifting gears, “the teaser trailer promised: 'They thought they were filming a ghost hunt, what they caught was something worse.'”

Ellie raised a brow. “Dramatic.”

“Plot's based on that Dudley town lore, but they moved it to Thorne field, Georgia. Total ghost town with a cursed reputation. The crew thinks they'll catch orbs or maybe a guy in a mask, but something follows them back.”

She tilted her head, amused. “And they stayed?”

“Horror logic.”

“Right.”

“There's a scene,” I continued, “where a guy gets yanked into the ceiling and doesn't come back down.”

She made a face. “Yeah, that's when I would've left. Packed my camera and filed a noise complaint from a different state.”

“Ceiling eats people, and they're still rolling. Dedication.”

“Or stupidity.”

“Both.”

She shook her head. “Gotta love a cursed Southern town.”

“Always the abandoned ones.”

As if on cue, a black bird swooped overhead and vanished behind a rooftop. We both glanced up.

Ellie tilted her head. “Crow or raven?”

I shrugged. “Let's debate that over ice cream.”

The shop across the street wasn't too crowded, and the freezer hummed like a small spaceship. Fluorescent lights gave everything a sterile, cold glow. Ellie studied the menu as if she were cramming for finals. I already knew my order.

“Brownie,” I told the guy behind the counter.

He scooped without comment.

Ellie tilted her head. “You really a brownie guy?”

“It's the closest thing to edible regret.”

She blinked. “That makes no sense.”

“Exactly.”

She snorted, then pointed at the sherbet. “I'll take rainbow.”

“Safe choice,” I said.

“Excuse me. This is a bold, confident swirl of color.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

We paid, grabbed our cups, and headed outside. The metal chairs squeaked as we sat. Spring hadn't fully committed yet, but the air was fine enough for lingering.

She took a bite and narrowed her eyes. “More citrus than I remember.”

“Regret's sounding better now, huh?”

“No. Regret tastes like sadness. This tastes like childhood plus a tiny bit of soap.”

I shrugged, scooping up the brownie. “Still better than cafeteria pizza.”

She pointed her spoon at me. “Okay, I liked the pizza.”

“That explains a lot.”

“Wow. Judgmental much?”

“Only when it's warranted.”

She laughed quietly, leaning back. The chipped table between us looked like it had been dropped one too many times. The quiet was not uncomfortable, just room to breathe.

A stillness like that never used to last for me; in foster homes, silence always felt like someone was about to slam a door or raise their voice. Even now, it sat heavier than it should. But with Ellie, it wasn't sharp; it was steady.

Ellie nudged her cup with her spoon.

“You think that movie had a point?”

“Which part?”

“All of it. The ending felt like... I don't know. Screaming into the void?”

I tapped my spoon against the rim.

“Maybe that was the point.”

She was unconvinced. “Or maybe they ran out of budget and leaned into the vagueness.”

“Also, possible.”

We both ate in silence for a beat. Just ice cream and a half-decent night. That was good enough for us.

Ellie tapped the side of her sherbet cup.

“So... what do you think those things were?”

“Eldritch. No doubt. They weren't ghosts or demons. They bent space. That basement scene? Time didn't even move right.”

She tilted her head. “I don't know. Felt too personal. Ghosts don't laugh like that. Demons do.”

“Cosmic horror can still be personal,” I said. “It's the wrongness that gets you.”

She gave me a flat look. “That's oddly specific.”

“Exactly.”

She shook her head, but a smile spread across her face. “I'm still saying demon.”

“And I still say, Eldritch.”

No winner, no need for one. It wasn't about answers; it was about keeping the night open.

The conversation drifted into horror debates, ice cream opinions, and easy topics that filled space without pressure. She talked about her photography work and the challenges of freelancing. I mentioned dropping out of the college program, the theme park job that had drained me.

“So where are you from, anyway?”

“Virginia,” I said. “Mostly. Moved around a lot, foster homes, group homes. But Virginia was the through-line.”

Her head tilted, soft, not pitying, just curious.

“I'm from Maryland. Same house since I was born. Honestly, I envy your chaos.”

I gave a dry laugh. “You envy chaos?”

“Well, not all of it. Just the part that doesn't feel stuck.”

“That makes one of us.”

The back-and-forth felt easy and natural. Like we'd been doing this for years, not days.

A black bird fluttered up from the sidewalk, wings slicing the still air. Ellie followed it with her eyes.

“I like ravens,” she said. “They're cool. Big, smart, mysterious.”

“Ravens? Really?”

She nodded. “They're like the gothic poets of the bird world.”

“They're just emo crows,” I said.

She froze mid-spoon. “Did you just call a raven a wannabe crow?”

“Absolutely. Crows travel in groups called a murder. That's metal.”

She laughed. “A murder is dramatic. You know what a group of ravens is called?”

“Let me guess. A committee?”

“A conspiracy,” she said with satisfaction. “Which fits. Ravens hold secrets. Crows leak them.”

I grinned. “Crows start rumors. Ravens bury them.”

“Exactly.”

“You know,” she said, poking the empty cup with her spoon, “you talk a lot more when you're not being defensive.”

“I'm not defensive,” I said, too fast.

She raised her spoon at me. “That.”

I didn't bother denying it. Just shrugged with a crooked grin.

“So let me get this straight,” she said. “You're a horror fan who likes brownie ice cream, has a complicated relationship with school, and thinks ravens are overrated?”

I scooped the last bit of brownie and chewed slowly. “Pretty much nailed it.”

She squinted like she was mentally filing it away. “Might have to get you professionally evaluated.”

I tilted my head. “Says the photographer who defends demons and voluntarily orders rainbow sherbet.”

“It's good sherbet,” she said. “And demons are more relatable.”

“Right. And you expect me to trust someone with sympathies that suspicious?”

She raised her empty cup in a mock toast. “I’ll take those odds.”

A couple walked past the window. Someone behind the counter wiped down the surface. It was that odd stretch of night that felt in-between, too late to be early, too early to call it final.

“You don’t talk like someone who likes talking,” she said suddenly.

“I don’t.”

She gestured between us. “Yet here we are.”

I shrugged. “You’re easier to talk to than most people.”

Her smile didn’t come right away. She studied me as if weighing the spaces between words.

“That’s what people say before they disappear.”

I hesitated. “I don’t disappear. I just... fade out quietly.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Like bad Wi-Fi?”

“Exactly.”

She laughed, folding her napkin into the cup. “You’re weird.”

“Takes one to know one.”

For a moment, she just looked at me, like she was trying to decide what kind of person I really was.

I hadn’t gone in expecting much tonight. Honestly, the movie was supposed to be the highlight. But now, sitting there with half-melted ice cream and a ridiculous monster debate behind us, I realized one thing clearly.

I wouldn't mind seeing what came next.

That night, I didn't think about how it might unravel. I didn't think about Warner, or complications, or timing.

I just knew I wanted to see her again.

And again after that.

Everything else could wait.

Walking back to the Metro later, the debate prep waiting at home felt less overwhelming. The second interview on Friday felt manageable. The final twelve announcement, whenever it came, didn't seem as terrifying.

Because for a few hours, I'd let myself just exist.

No calculations. No probability assessments. No mapping outcomes.

Just this: ice cream, horror movies, and someone who made the chaos feel a little less chaotic.

I had three weeks until the debate. Ten days until my second interview. A program I was desperately trying to finish. A job I loved at Sanctuary. And now, maybe, something else worth keeping.

My life was a careful balance of too many things.

But tonight, walking beside Ellie through the city streets, I wasn't worried about the balance.

I was just glad to be here.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Week 9 of LEAP

After the second break, the Director led me and eleven others into the room. A monitor at the front glowed faintly blue, the video already queued up. We took our seats as the LEAP logo filled the screen, and the lights dimmed. The silence pressed down, as if we were about to watch something sacred.

Thirty of us had started the Champion Initiative track. Now, only twelve chairs were filled.

I glanced around the room, cataloging faces. Aaron sat two seats down, posture straight but fingers drumming against his knee. Marcus leaned back with practiced calm, but his jaw was tight. A few others I recognized from interviews and group sessions. Some I'd barely spoken to. All of us were waiting for the same thing.

The video flickered to life. There he was: Juggernaut Jack Winter.

Not in his usual wrestling gear, but in a tucked-in work shirt with rolled sleeves, suspenders stretched over his broad shoulders, and navy dress slacks that barely tamed the bulk of his legs. His former Heavyweight Championship belt hung proudly over one shoulder like the world's most intimidating accessory. Even dressed for a boardroom, he looked like he could bench-press the conference table without breaking a sweat.

"Hello, everyone," he began, his voice commanding yet oddly welcoming. "I'm Juggernaut Jack Winter, five-time Royal Rumble winner, known for my signature German Suplex."

He gave the belt a fond pat. "They let me keep this one. I stepped down after an injury, but I joined LEAP because they helped me get where I am today."

We sat in silence as his story unfolded.

"Before my wrestling days, I was in your shoes. The plumbing training I received through this program laid the foundation for my journey. It taught me discipline, focus, and the value of hard work."

Jack leaned forward, like he was speaking directly to each of us. "Your dedication has brought you here, and the next step is the Champion Banquet, a chance to celebrate your journey and meet with LEAP's partners. Shine at this, and opportunities will open."

He paused, letting that sink in. "And even if you're not among the final winners, don't worry. Our partner companies are always seeking individuals with your drive and determination. You've already proven yourselves."

The screen faded back to the LEAP logo as the lights returned. I rubbed my palms against my thighs, unsettled by how much weight his words carried. It wasn't just hype; it felt like a door swinging open in the distance, waiting for anyone brave enough to walk through.

The Assistant Director entered, smiling warmly. "Congratulations," she said, then paused for effect. "To our final twelve."

The words hung in the air for a heartbeat.

Then she began reading names.

"Aaron Huang."

Aaron exhaled a quiet sound of relief. A few people clapped.

"Marcus Lewis."

Marcus nodded once, face unreadable, but I saw his shoulders drop just slightly.

She continued down the list. Names I recognized. Names I didn't. Each one called was a small victory, each silence between names a held breath.

My heart hammered against my ribs. My brain was already running probability calculations, showing how many names remained, how many spots were left, and the odds.

"Samuel Wright."

Everything went quiet except the pounding in my chest.

I'd made it.

Final twelve.

But that afternoon, in that room with the LEAP logo glowing behind the Assistant Director, I just felt the weight lift — the weight I'd been carrying since the first interview, the first exam, every moment of wondering if I was good enough.

Aaron caught my eye and grinned. Marcus gave me a subtle nod.

I nodded back.

We'd all made it.

The Assistant Director finished reading the names, then gestured toward the door. "Take a fifteen-minute break. We'll reconvene shortly to discuss next steps."

As we filed out, conversations erupted — excited, relieved, some tinged with disbelief. Aaron clapped me on the shoulder.

"We did it, man."

"Yeah," I said, still processing. "We did."

Marcus stretched, rolling his neck. "Twelve out of thirty. Not bad odds."

"Not bad at all," Aaron agreed.

I was about to suggest we grab coffee when the Program Coordinator slipped into the hallway and pulled the Assistant Director aside. Their voices weren't exactly subtle.

"This is a disaster," the coordinator muttered, stress bleeding through every word. "The original venue for the Champion Banquet fell through due to plumbing issues, of all things, and no one's available on short notice."

The Assistant Director rubbed their temples. "We need a miracle."

"I've called every venue I can think of," the coordinator said. "Nothing. Not unless we want to host it in a bowling alley."

A ripple of unease moved through the finalists still lingering nearby. Conversations died down as people tuned in to the unfolding crisis.

Aaron's eyes flicked toward me, already working angles. Marcus leaned closer.

"That's not good," Marcus said quietly.

I stood there, mind racing. A venue crisis. Two weeks until the banquet. No backup plan.

And then it hit me: **Eve.**

Her name dropped into my head like a stone — heavy, solid, impossible to ignore. Sterling Feast had worked with the Eldridge Pavilion numerous times. If anyone could get the reservation sorted on short notice, it would be her. Her connections, her timing, her professionalism — I had to reach out.

I weighed the cost, the logistics, the risks.

Aaron noticed me staring into the middle distance. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

I hesitated. Then I looked at him. Then at Marcus.

"I might have an idea," I said slowly. "But it's going to cost us."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Define 'cost.'"

"A lot."

Aaron crossed his arms. "How much is a lot?"

I told them. Both of them winced.

"That's..." Aaron trailed off.

"Yeah," I said.

Marcus exhaled through his nose. "But if we pull it off..."

"If we pull it off," I said, "no one forgets it."

That was all Aaron needed to hear. He nodded once, decisively. "I'm in."

Marcus studied me for a long moment, then shrugged. "Guess we're doing this."

I took a breath, then walked over to where the Director stood conferring with the Assistant Director and Program Coordinator.

"Excuse me," I said.

They turned. The Director's expression was neutral but attentive, the look of someone used to solving problems quickly.

"I might have a solution," I said. "For the venue."

The coordinator blinked. "You do?"

"Eldridge Pavilion," I said. "I know someone who can get us in."

The Director's eyebrows lifted slightly. "That's... ambitious."

"It's available," I said, though I didn't actually know that yet. "And it would make a statement."

The Assistant Director glanced at the coordinator, then back at me. "Can you confirm availability?"

"I can make a call right now," I said.

The Director studied me for a moment, then nodded. "Do it."

I pulled out my phone and stepped into the hallway, Aaron and Marcus trailing behind me.

"You sure about this?" Aaron asked.

"Not even a little," I admitted.

I scrolled to Eve's number and hit call. It rang twice.

"Samuel?" Eve's voice came through, bright and curious. "What's up?"

"I need a favor," I said. "A big one."

"How big?"

"Eldridge Pavilion big."

There was a pause. Then she laughed — not mockingly, just surprised. "You're serious."

"Dead serious. LEAP's venue fell through. Banquet's in two weeks. We need something impressive, and I need your help."

Another pause, longer this time. I could almost hear her thinking.

"Eldridge Pavilion..." she said slowly. "You know Sterling Feast has catered there before, right? Multiple times. I might actually be able to get them to answer."

"That's why I'm calling you," I said.

"Alright," she said finally. "But this is going to cost you."

"I know."

"No, I mean it's going to cost you. Three favors. No take-backs."

I closed my eyes. "Done."

"And the venue itself isn't cheap."

"I know," I said again, quieter this time.

"Okay," Eve said, voice shifting into business mode. "Give me twenty minutes."

"Thank you," I said, meaning it.

"Don't thank me yet. Let me see if I can even get them to pick up."

She hung up.

I leaned against the wall, phone still in my hand. Marcus and Aaron exchanged glances.

"So?" Marcus asked.

"She's calling them now."

We waited. Fifteen minutes felt like an hour.

My phone buzzed.

"They're available," Eve said, no preamble. "But here's the number."

She told me. I felt my stomach drop.

"That's..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"I know," Eve said gently. "Want me to keep looking?"

I thought about it — the other finalists, the Director's expectations, the weight of this moment. Standing in front of LEAP's partners in a bowling alley versus the Eldridge Pavilion, with its chandeliers, marble floors, and history of high-profile events.

"No," I said. "Book it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. I'll handle the details. You're going to owe me forever, you know that?"

"I know," I said, a faint smile tugging at my lips despite everything. "Thank you, Eve."

"Anytime, Samuel."

I hung up and looked at Aaron and Marcus.

"It's done," I said.

"And?" Aaron prompted.

I told them the cost. Both of them went pale.

"That's more than I thought," Marcus said carefully.

"Same," Aaron muttered.

"We can split it three ways," I said. "That makes it... slightly less catastrophic."

"Slightly," Marcus echoed, but he was already pulling out his phone, probably checking his account balance.

Aaron rubbed the back of his neck. "Alright. Let's do it."

We walked back to where the Director waited.

"Eldridge Pavilion is secured," I said. "Two weeks from today."

The Director's expression went from surprised to something closer to approval. "That's... impressive work."

The Assistant Director smiled. "Thank you. Truly."

The Program Coordinator exhaled in visible relief. "I'll coordinate with them directly for logistics."

As they walked away to make calls, Aaron, Marcus, and I stood there in the hallway.

"Well," Marcus said eventually. "That happened."

"Yeah," I said.

Aaron grinned. "If we're going to go bankrupt, might as well do it in style."

I laughed despite myself. "Definitely."

Later that night, alone in my apartment, I opened my banking app. The number stared back at me, smaller than it had been that morning by a significant margin. I'd known the cost going in. I'd said yes anyway. Rent was barely covered for next month. Food would be tight. Any emergency, any unexpected expense, and I'd be in trouble.

I closed the app and set my phone face down on the table. Worth it, I told myself. This was an investment. In the program. In my future. In proving I belonged in rooms like the Eldridge Pavilion.

But my stomach still twisted with anxiety.

My phone buzzed. Text from Alice: *Hey! Heard you made the final 12! That's amazing!*

I smiled despite the financial anxiety churning in my gut. At least something was going right.

Thanks. Yeah, still processing it.

You deserve it. Warner drama aside, at least one of us is having a good week lol.

I hesitated, then typed: *Want to grab coffee this weekend? Could use a break from stressing about money.*

Definitely. Sunday?

Sunday works.

I set my phone down, feeling slightly better. Alice's friendship had been one of the few constants lately — easy, uncomplicated, even with her ongoing Warner situation in the background.

Looking back now, I can see securing that venue was both the smartest and stupidest thing I'd done. Smart because it gave Aaron, Marcus, and me a real shot at standing out. The Director noticed. The coordinators noticed. We weren't just participants anymore. We were problem-solvers.

Stupid because I'd gambled nearly everything I had on a single night.

But that evening, staring at my depleted bank account, I just knew one thing:

I couldn't afford to lose now.

Too much was riding on this.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Present Day

I pushed open the door to Dr. Dyer's office, stepping inside at a pace that wasn't exactly slow but wasn't rushed either. It wasn't hesitation, not like before, when showing up felt like walking into something I wasn't ready for. This time, it felt more like carrying a weight. Heavy, but not solid. I couldn't tell if it came from the session itself or just the topic waiting on the other side of this conversation.

The office hadn't changed. The books were still stacked unevenly on the shelf. The air still carried that faint trace of cedar and paper. The clock on the wall ticked with its usual steady rhythm. The familiarity should've grounded me. Instead, it made the shift in my mood more obvious. It wasn't the space that felt different today.

It was me.

I sat down, not meeting his gaze right away. My fingers drummed lightly against my knee. I caught myself and shoved my hands into my hoodie pocket — old nervous tic. My brain was already running scenarios, possible questions, possible answers, half the outcomes I wouldn't even say out loud. Classic overthinking before anything had even started.

Dr. Dyer watched me, expression neutral, pen tapping lazily against his notepad.

Then, in a tone just casual enough to throw me off, he said, "You look like someone who just got assigned a group project."

A sound escaped me somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh. I shook my head. "Relationships? Feels like a group project I never signed up for."

He smirked. "You and the rest of the world."

I leaned back in the chair, exhaling through my nose. "Fair."

"What makes relationships feel like that to you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. You're just kind of expected to play along, right? People encroach on your space, they want things from you, and they expect you to care as much as they do. Feels like work."

"An obligation," Dr. Dyer said, tapping his pen once against his knee.

The word sat there between us.

Obligation.

It felt uncomfortably accurate — too neat a label for something that felt more like dozens of small wires pulling at me from every direction.

I didn't answer. I let out a slow breath and leaned back in my seat. My eyes caught the crooked stack of books near his desk. One leaned off the edge just enough that my brain started calculating how long it would take gravity to win.

A distraction. I needed one.

The weight of family — birth parents, foster homes, all the versions of "obligation" I'd been handed — pressed at the edges of my thoughts. I didn't want to walk down that road. Not today.

Dr. Dyer let the silence settle, then nudged the conversation sideways. That was his rhythm. He didn't force me down the deepest path every time. Sometimes he stepped us onto safer ground first.

"I don't mean that in a bad way," I said finally. "I know people need people and all that. I just... I don't know. It's complicated."

"It always is." He leaned forward slightly. "Do you think it's always been like that for you? Or did something make it feel that way?"

I smirked, though there wasn't much humor in it.

"Doc, I grew up in foster care. That answer's kind of obvious, don't you think?"

He didn't blink. "Sure. But let's go deeper than that. You've had relationships, friends, maybe even something more. What about those?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, stalling. My brain wanted to categorize the question — data points, outliers, and failed experiments — but that didn't sound like an answer you'd give in therapy.

"Friends are fine," I said finally.

"'Fine' is vague."

"I mean it. The ones I have are the ones I like. But I don't let a lot of people in."

"Because?"

"Because I don't like repeating myself."

The words came out sharper than I meant, but it was true. Every new connection felt like starting a lecture from slide one, explaining history, motives, quirks, every strange corner of me. Exhausting.

He gave me a knowing look. "Meaning you don't like explaining yourself to new people."

I tapped the arm of the chair lightly, counting the beats. "Yeah. I'm not good at all the extra stuff that comes with friendships. People bring drama, expectations, and obligations. I don't need that."

Dr. Dyer considered that for a moment. "And what about love?"

I let out a short laugh. "Hard pass."

"Romantic relationships specifically," he pressed, not letting me off easy.

I shifted in my seat. "What about them?"

"Have you ever been in one?"

"Define 'in one.'"

He tilted his head. "Mutual. Intentional. More than casual."

I thought about it longer than I should have. "No. Not really."

"Not really meaning...?"

"Meaning there were situations. People I liked. Things that almost turned into something." I paused. "But I always found a reason to step back before it got too real."

"Why?"

The question sat there, simple and impossible all at once.

"Because," I said slowly, "once someone really knows you, they have something to lose. And when they leave — and they always leave — it's not just a person walking out the door. It's everything they knew about you going with them."

Dr. Dyer was quiet for a moment. "That sounds less like fear of intimacy and more like fear of being erased."

The word landed somewhere I wasn't expecting.

Erased.

I didn't argue with it.

"Yeah," I said, after a pause. "Maybe."

He made a note, then set his pen down again.

"Tell me about the people who stayed," he said. "Neil. Eve. The ones you mentioned before."

I exhaled. "What about them?"

"They stayed. That's not nothing. What made them different?"

I thought about it. Really thought about it.

"They didn't need me to explain myself," I said finally. "Neil just... showed up. Eve checked in. Neither of them made it feel like work." I shook my head slightly. "They just accepted the version of me that existed and stuck around anyway."

"And that felt rare."

"That felt impossible," I corrected. "And yet."

Dr. Dyer nodded slowly, like something had just confirmed itself for him.

"And yet," he echoed.

The silence that followed wasn't heavy. It was just there, holding space.

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"And yet," he echoed.

The silence that followed wasn't heavy. It was just there, holding space.

"When we first met," Dr. Dyer said, "you told me you'd moved around a lot."

My jaw tightened before I forced it to relax. "Yeah."

"Tell me about that again. I think it's important context for understanding why LEAP mattered so much to you."

I knew where this was going. We'd touched on it before, but never fully unpacked it.

"Doctor," I said, staring at my hands, "I can say I've lived in all seven cities in the 757."

Dr. Dyer didn't nod or drop some canned line about how hard that must've been. He just let me say it.

I could have stopped there. Should have, probably.

But the door was already open.

"Portsmouth. Norfolk. Chesapeake. Virginia Beach. Suffolk. Hampton. Newport News."

The names came out flat, like a checklist.

"Each one had a house. A room that was never really mine. A bed that never felt like it belonged to me. I'd walk into classrooms full of strangers, forced to introduce myself again and again, same script, same questions, same awkward smile."

My fingers tapped once against my knee before I stopped them.

"By the tenth round, even the words sounded fake. Like I was auditioning to be myself."

Dr. Dyer stayed quiet, not just hearing, but actually taking it in.

"I remember sitting in strangers' living rooms," I continued, voice quieter. "Hands on my knees, waiting for them to decide if I was worth keeping. Some smiled too much, trying to act natural. Others barely glanced at me, just skimmed the paperwork while I sat there like luggage waiting for its next destination."

The memory sharpened, unwanted but persistent.

"There was this woman once. Offered me a cookie five minutes after meeting me, like sugar could fix the fact that she was just another person I'd have to learn the rules of."

"Did you take it?" Dr. Dyer asked.

"Yeah. Not because I wanted it. Because it was easier."

He nodded once in understanding, not judgment.

"Some homes were fine," I said, shifting my weight. "The kind where no one screamed, where no one hit, where I wasn't treated like an inconvenience. Others were colder. Quieter. Like being tolerated but never included."

I paused, then added, "And then there were the bad ones. The ones where I learned to keep my bag packed, just in case."

A faint clicking drew me back to the sound of the clock on his wall, ticking unevenly. I blinked, grounding myself in the present.

Dr. Dyer was still watching. Not with pity. Just quiet attention.

"Every transition felt less like being chosen," I said, "and more like being processed."

"And you stopped unpacking after a while," he observed.

"What was the point?" I met his eyes. "My mind kept a running list of possible rules in every new place. Like I was debugging a program no one had bothered to document."

The silence that followed wasn't heavy. It was just there, holding space.

Then I heard myself talking again.

"I had a foster couple once." The words came out before I could stop them. "Nice people. Or they seemed nice at first."

Dr. Dyer waited.

"They thought they couldn't have kids, so they adopted me. It was quick, almost too quick. Usually, the process takes longer, but I guess they had the right connections. One day I was just... theirs."

I could still picture their faces. The way they smiled at me like I was some missing puzzle piece they'd finally found.

"They made a big deal about family," I continued. "Kept saying this was permanent. That I was their son now. That we were gonna be a family."

I leaned back, eyes drifting toward the bookshelf. The memory stayed bright until it tilted.

"Then the test came back positive."

Dr. Dyer didn't react, but I knew he was listening.

"They were so happy," I said, almost laughing, though it wasn't a good kind of laugh. "Told me I was going to be a big brother. Made a whole thing out of it. They even got me this navy shirt with big block letters across the front. 'Big Brother.'"

The memory of that shirt cut sharper than the rest. I could still feel the fabric against my skin, the weight of expectation stitched into it. Funny how fabric can outlast people.

"They had this dinner planned," I went on. "A reveal for their family. I was supposed to walk in wearing it, and everyone would get the message. This perfect little moment."

I shook my head. "Less than a week later, they sent me back."

The words hung there.

Dr. Dyer still didn't speak. Didn't rush to fill it.

"They didn't even say why," I said quietly. "No big speech. No tearful goodbye. Just packed my things, drove me back to the agency, and left."

I kept my shoulders steady. "I don't think they ever told their family I existed."

Silence stretched between us. Dr. Dyer didn't rush to fill it or offer neat conclusions.

And somehow, that made it easier to sit with.

He leaned back slightly, elbows resting on the chair's arms. His posture hadn't changed — calm, measured, and patient in a way that was neither inviting nor dismissive.

"That must have reinforced a lot of beliefs," he said finally. "About permanence. About your place in people's lives."

I didn't answer right away. My eyes drifted to the window, watching dust particles float through a shaft of afternoon light.

"Yeah," I admitted. "It did."

"And LEAP felt different because...?"

"Because it was concrete. Three months. Specific skills. Clear outcomes." I tapped my fingers once against the armrest. "If I succeeded, I'd have proof I could finish something. If I failed, at least I'd know it wasn't because someone changed their mind about wanting me around."

Dr. Dyer nodded slowly. "Control."

"Or the illusion of it," I said. "Which is still better than nothing."

He made another note, then set his pen down.

"We don't have to go into all of it today," he said. "This is just to get a sense of where you're starting from."

I nodded along with him.

"But I'd like to hear about the beginning," he added. "When you first arrived in DC for the program."

I settled back into the chair, pulling the memory forward.

"It was mid-August. I took a bus from Virginia — five hours, but it felt longer. I kept checking the same three documents over and over, convinced I'd somehow gotten on the wrong bus and would end up in the wrong city."

Dr. Dyer's mouth twitched. Almost a smile.

"When I got there, I had two suitcases. One with clothes. One with random things I couldn't throw away: thrift store finds, books I

never finished, a newsboy cap Neil said made me look like I was auditioning for a 1920s film."

"And your first night there?" he prompted.

"Couldn't sleep. Just lay there thinking about everything that could go wrong."

"Anticipatory anxiety," he observed.

"Yeah." I shifted slightly. "But I also felt something else. Something I hadn't felt in a long time."

"What was that?"

I paused, searching for the right word.

"Hope," I said finally. "Terrifying, fragile hope that maybe this time would be different. That maybe I could actually pull this off."

Dr. Dyer leaned forward slightly. "And was it? Different?"

I met his eyes.

"That's what I'm still trying to figure out."

He glanced at the clock on his desk. The session had moved faster than I expected.

"That's a good place to stop for today," he said. "Think about what that first day felt like. We can pick up from here next time."

"Alright."

I stood, grabbing my jacket from the back of the chair.

There was a brief pause, just a beat, where neither of us spoke.

Then Dr. Dyer said, "You're doing good work here, Samuel. Whether you continue or not, that part matters."

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything that wouldn't sound dismissive or self-deprecating.

"Thanks."

I wrote that session down tonight, sitting at my kitchen table with coffee that went cold two hours ago. The memory of it is still fresh: Dr. Dyer's calm silence, the way he let me take my time, the weight of finally saying some of this out loud.

He'd probably say something about how writing it down is part of the work. Processing it. Making sense of what happened.

He'd be right.

He said he'd let me know soon whether we'd continue.

I'm not sure I'm ready to write that one yet.

But I will. Eventually.

For now, this is enough.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Week 10 of LEAP

The soft chime of a bell signaled the transition. The large double doors at the back of the hall swung open, revealing the dining area — a lavish room bathed in warm golden light. A grand chandelier hung above, its crystal ornaments scattering reflections across polished tables. The scent of rich, carefully prepared dishes filled the air, teasing an appetite I hadn't realized I had.

The finalists moved as one, subtly straightening their postures. We all knew what this was. The first part of the evening had been about proving we deserved to be here. Now, it was about making an impression — a lasting one.

A quiet instrumental band played in the background, soft, elegant music that lifted the room without overpowering it. It worked.

Aaron walked beside me, muttering, "Some of these guys look ready for a TED Talk."

Marcus smirked. "If I hear one more person say they're deeply passionate about industry synergy, I might stab my salad."

He wasn't wrong.

As we entered, the layout clicked into place in my head — a mental snapshot. The long table stretched across the room like a runway; finalists staggered between executives from LEAP's main sponsors, industry leaders in tailored suits, and partners who looked like they hadn't lifted a chair in years. It wasn't random seating. It was strategically designed to force conversations you couldn't coast through.

We were guided to our places, name cards neatly waiting. I scanned ours:

- Samuel Wright, between a senior rep from one of LEAP's cornerstone partners and a representative from a Japanese tech firm that had recently signed on.
- Aaron Huang, beside a Carpentry sponsor — a thickset man with sun-leathered skin and calloused hands that spoke of real work, not PowerPoint slides.
- Marcus Lewis, across from us, within earshot of a finance executive who already looked like he was calculating ROI on every syllable.

I reached for my chair, careful to lift rather than drag it. Small details mattered here. The kind of people in this room noticed things like that.

At the far end of the table, a finalist from the Office Admin program was launching into an over-rehearsed pitch about his strong leadership skills in high-pressure environments. Two seats down, another contestant unraveled mid-sentence, buzzwords spilling like marbles across the table.

A few chairs away, the Japanese company rep — mid-fifties, expression carved between patience and judgment — listened as another finalist stumbled through an answer. His face stayed neutral, but I had the sense he'd already measured the room twice over.

Meanwhile, Aaron was already adapting as he'd trained for this. He leaned toward the Carpentry sponsor.

"Can I ask," he said, tone respectful but direct, "why do you think vocational careers still don't get the same push as office jobs?"

The sponsor's attention sharpened immediately.

"Good question," he said, setting down his drink. "It's perception. Too many people still see trades as fallback options when they're anything but. You're aware of the demand for trained carpenters, HVAC techs, plumbers, and other skilled workers, unlike most office jobs. But schools don't promote that. They push everyone toward a desk."

"Seems like that's starting to shift, though," Aaron said.

"It is. LEAP adding Carpentry? That's huge. Real work. Real skills." The man tapped the table once, firmly. "People will always want things built, fixed, or installed. That doesn't change."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught subtle movement: two LEAP board executives — a sharp-eyed woman in a navy suit and a balding man known for cutting through the fluff — leaned closer, tuning in to Aaron's conversation. That was the difference. Aaron wasn't speaking to impress; he was asking questions that carried weight.

Then the Japanese rep beside me spoke.

"LEAP is an interesting initiative," he said. His voice was calm, his English deliberate. "It teaches practical skills, yes, but how do you see those skills translating beyond this program?"

The question landed squarely in my lap.

I set down my glass and took a slow breath. I could have gone with the safe route: job placement, résumés, administration as a stepping stone. But that wasn't really what he was asking.

"Efficiency is universal," I said. "Whether it's a law firm, a tech startup, or a manufacturing floor, people who know how to structure workflow, manage processes, and keep communication smooth will always be needed. That's what I've taken from this program — it's less about a job title and more about adaptability."

His eyes stayed on me, expression unreadable. Not quite approval — more like curiosity, as if he was weighing the thought process behind my answer more than the words themselves.

Across the table, I noticed the finance executive flick his gaze toward me, then toward the board members listening to Aaron. Subtle, but a signal.

Marcus, unusually quiet until now, leaned in. "So you're saying admin careers are a gateway to bigger things?"

The rep gave a small, knowing smile. "That would be one way to put it."

Marcus smirked. "Well, it's true. The people behind the scenes hold everything together — they just don't get the spotlight."

That line landed. A few executives chuckled softly, and even the Japanese rep's lips curved in something close to amusement.

Meanwhile, I kept observing — eyes moving, ears open, piecing together what mattered. Some finalists knew how to handle this setting: calm, composed, adaptable. Others? Not so much. One guy talked over an executive, another froze mid-question, rambling.

And then there were the ones who understood the real game being played.

Aaron was already drawing a senior sponsor into a genuine conversation.

Marcus — casual but deliberate.

A few others drifted through the room like they'd practiced belonging.

It clicked into a mental snapshot: the sharp-suited guy on my left, leaning too far forward; another, laughing too loudly to fill the silence; Aaron, steady as if he'd been doing this for years. Half the table worked too hard; the other half looked like they belonged here.

This wasn't about surviving the night.

It was about standing out.

And I wasn't planning on fading into the background.

Then the food arrived, shifting the energy. Servers from Sterling Feast glided between tables, placing the first course: jumbo lump crab cakes with lemon aioli, artisanal bruschetta with heirloom tomatoes, and baskets of freshly baked bread with small dishes of truffle butter.

Marcus didn't waste time. He speared a crab cake, took a bite, and froze as if he'd just seen God.

"I'm not even exaggerating — this is the best thing I've ever eaten."

Aaron grabbed a piece of bruschetta, inspecting it before taking a bite. "So this is rich-people food, huh?"

I reached for a slice of bread and spread truffle butter carefully. The first bite wasn't overwhelming, just different — a quiet luxury. A world away from frozen meals and greasy diner runs cobbled together on a budget.

Across the table, one finalist — a guy from the Office Admin program — was already mid-monologue about his appreciation for fine dining. He gestured at the food as if he were hosting a TED Talk.

"In high-end cuisine, presentation is as important as taste. It's about the experience of how flavors interact, how textures complement each other."

The Japanese company rep, composed and patient, listened politely but said nothing, waiting for something more substantial.

Marcus caught my eye, fighting back a smirk.

Aaron muttered under his breath, "He's treating this like an exam."

I chewed my bread slowly, filing mental notes. The right move here wasn't overcompensation — it was authenticity.

Appetizers cleared, and the main course arrived. I'd chosen the herb-crusted salmon with saffron risotto. Aaron went for the filet mignon, and Marcus predictably went all in on the steak.

Marcus sliced into his plate and sighed deeply. "This? This is what I've been missing my whole life."

"If I ever make real money, I'm eating like this every night," Aaron added, chewing thoughtfully.

I took a bite of salmon — tender, perfectly cooked, a bright hint of citrus cutting through the richness. It made me realize just how much difference quality really makes.

Across the room, a couple of finalists murmured about the event's precision and polish. One leaned toward another. "There's no way next week's event tops this."

Marcus smirked. "They peaked here. Everything else is a downgrade."

The Director circled the room, stopping at each table to exchange polite words and handshakes, quietly assessing us. His eyes were sharp but calm, tracking posture, tone, and timing. When he reached ours, he offered a professional nod.

"I trust you're all enjoying the evening?"

A chorus of polite "yes, sir" replies followed.

His gaze shot to Aaron. "You're part of the Office Administration track, correct?"

Aaron set down his fork and adjusted his posture. "Yes, sir."

The Director glanced between the Carpentry sponsor and the Japanese company rep.

"Office work and hands-on trades are two very different fields. Yet both demand efficiency. What's been the most valuable lesson you've learned from LEAP so far?"

Aaron didn't miss a beat.

"Time management," he said. "I used to think efficiency meant working fast. Now I know it's about working smart — delegating when needed, balancing priorities, making sure small tasks don't swallow the big picture."

The financial industry rep across from us perked up. "That's a strong answer."

"No matter the field, time management separates the ones who barely keep up from the ones who move forward."

The Director seemed pleased. "That's an insightful way to put it."

As the main-course plates were cleared, the conversation turned to bigger questions.

A partner company executive — tall and composed in a navy suit — spoke next.

"Where do you all see yourselves in five years?"

A few finalists answered first — safe responses about stability, growth, and new skills. Respectable, but forgettable.

Then she focused on me.

I set down my fork. I had options. I could say something safe, something expected.

Instead, I went with the truth.

"At first, I thought this program was just something to get through," I said. "But after a while, I started seeing the bigger picture. It's not just about the job — it's about how you move through spaces like this. How you position yourself."

For a second, everything stilled. I caught Aaron across from me, Marcus at my side, the Japanese rep and the Director angled down the table, executives watching from the flanks like sentinels. A mental snapshot — I knew I'd remember the table, the light, the faces.

Aaron muttered, "You really know how to make things sound deep."

Marcus, barely smiling, added, "You should put that on a résumé."

The Japanese company rep studied me. Up until now, he'd barely reacted, but this time his eyes sharpened.

"You bring up positioning," he said. "How do you define that for yourself?"

I met his gaze.

"It's about reading the room — knowing when to speak, when to listen. Recognizing opportunity when it's in front of you, and knowing when to step up."

The Director watched closely, expression unreadable.

The Japanese rep gave a slight nod, almost to himself, as if confirming something.

Marcus, keeping it light, said, "I used to think office work was just people sending emails all day." He smirked. "Turns out, it's people sending emails and managing chaos."

A few chuckles circled the table.

The Director smiled faintly. "That's more accurate than I'd like to admit."

Some answers landed better than others. Some felt rehearsed. Others, like Aaron's, stood out naturally.

This night wasn't just about standing out.

It could be about being recognized.

The clinking of silverware died down as the last plates were cleared. The shift was almost immediate. Polite chatter gave way to sharper exchanges, the weight of the night pressing in on all of

us. Finalists who had been laughing moments ago now sat straighter, their smiles tightening.

Everyone was thinking the same thing.

Someone finally said it.

"Has the Champion Initiative winner already been chosen?"

It came from the far end of the table — a finalist from the Office Admin program. His tone was casual, but his eyes were sharp. Everyone else went still, waiting.

The Director, seated at the head of the table, didn't blink. His smile remained composed and polished, revealing nothing.

"Tonight isn't about making final decisions," he said. "It's about seeing how you all present yourselves in a professional setting. Every moment counts."

Translation: We're watching you.

Across the table, one finalist who had been slouching suddenly sat up, smoothing his tie.

Marcus leaned toward me and whispered, "So basically, don't spill your drink and don't say anything stupid."

"I think we're good on one of those," I muttered.

Aaron exhaled. "Man, they're really making this dramatic."

The Director took a sip of his drink, unbothered. Executives and company reps in finance, tech, and healthcare kept their eyes on us. They weren't here for food or networking — they were here to evaluate, silently making notes that could change our futures.

And we all knew it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Week 10 of LEAP

A few moments later, the Director stood, raising his glass.

"I want to thank you all for being here tonight. LEAP has come a long way, and so have each of you. This isn't just a program — it's a launchpad. What you do with it is up to you."

He looked around the table, making deliberate eye contact with several finalists.

"We're expanding. Adding new programs. Creating more opportunities. But no matter how much we grow, one thing remains the same: excellence is earned, not given."

The financial rep chimed in. "With more companies stepping forward to partner with LEAP, we're looking at real, long-term career placement."

There it was — the whole point of the night.

This wasn't just about dressing well and answering questions; it was about proving leadership — about who would leave here set up for the future and who wouldn't.

The Director lifted his glass for a final toast.

"To the next step."

I took a sip. I'd come a long way from just showing up for the stipend. At first, that was all — this was a paycheck, a way to keep moving without feeling stuck.

Now, it was something more.

I glanced at Aaron and Marcus. Both were deep in conversation with company reps, holding their own in a room full of decision-makers.

A few months ago, none of us would've been here.

But now?

Now we were sitting at the table.

Still, one question gnawed at me.

Did I do enough?

Was I memorable enough to win the Champion Initiative?

Or had I blended in — just another name on a list?

I didn't know.

Six months later, Dr. Dyer would ask me whether I'd known that night whether I'd won.

I'd tell him no. I'd felt like I'd done well with the positioning speech, the conversations, the way I'd held my own in that room. But I hadn't felt certain.

Certainty would come later. And it wouldn't feel the way I expected.

That night, though, walking out of the Eldridge Pavilion, I just felt like I'd left everything on the table. Whether it was enough, I'd find out soon.

The night began to wind down. Chairs scraped as people stood, shook hands, and exchanged final words. Executives slipped out first — finance, then tech, then healthcare — efficient and quiet, their decisions already made.

The Director lingered, speaking with a few key guests before exiting.

The rest of us drifted toward the doors in small groups.

Marcus sighed. "Well. That was something."

Aaron gave him a look. "That's all you got? Something?"

Marcus shrugged. "What do you want me to say? We ate fancy food, answered a bunch of questions, and now we're supposed to pretend we're not all wondering the same thing."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

Marcus scoffed. "Who won?"

"Yeah," Aaron replied. "We'll find out soon enough."

I stayed quiet. Inside had been polished, rehearsed, controlled — but this moment, walking out, felt real. I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked the time. Nothing left to do now but wait.

My phone buzzed. Text from Alice: *How'd it go??*

I smiled faintly. *Good, I think. Fancy food, important people. The usual.*

Lol, you sound so thrilled. Warner's being impossible, btw. Can we do coffee this week? Need a friend who's not dramatic.

Definitely. Tuesday?

Perfect. You got this, Samuel.

I pocketed my phone, feeling slightly lighter.

Aaron stretched, rolling his shoulders. "Guess all that's left is seeing where the chips fall."

Marcus smirked. "And seeing if I can sell this fancy chocolate online. Might cover next month's rent."

Aaron groaned. "Man, just eat the damn chocolate."

I half-listened, my thoughts elsewhere.

This wasn't just about tonight. This was about everything that came next.

Chapter Thirty

Week 10 of LEAP

People assume that when you're quiet, you're afraid. But that's not it. It's not fear. It's not nerves. Most of the time, I just don't have much to add. And when I do have something to say, it's usually not ready. Not polished. Not shaped into the kind of sentence that lands the way I want it to.

So I hold it back.

Years of switching schools trained that instinct into me. Every first day followed the same script: stand up, introduce yourself, list a few "fun facts" to a room of strangers pretending to care.

After a while, the repetition dulled into something heavier than anxiety. Exhaustion. By the fourth move, my introduction felt like borrowed lines from a character I didn't quite recognize.

"Hi, I'm Samuel. I like reading and basketball."

It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't anything.

The real things — the complicated parts, the questions, the sharp edges — never fit into thirty seconds. And I never knew how to say them without sounding either dramatic or strange.

So I stopped trying.

It wasn't stage fright. It was fatigue. And maybe a little perfectionism. If I couldn't say it exactly right, I'd rather say nothing at all.

That's what keeps me quiet.

Not fear.

Just the sense that most people don't really want to know you — they want the summary version. And I was tired of handing it out.

Ralph, Ruth, and Carmen have been grilling Neil nonstop, testing his knowledge for the upcoming discussion. They're relentless, tossing trivia and hypothetical scenarios at him like rapid fire, making sure he's ready for any curveball STAND might throw.

Neil's also been working on controlling his intensity about STAND. His ongoing conflict with Eugene James — Neil's rival from the STAND debate — had gotten under his skin in ways I hadn't fully realized. He cared about this fight — this one in particular — more than anything else we'd tackled together. Watching him practice staying measured is like watching someone try to hold back a tidal wave through sheer willpower.

Admirable.

Not always successful.

Ralph came up with a clever idea, offering Sanctuary customers small discounts in exchange for helping us prepare. I've been reading snippets of cannabis history and trivia aloud, and some of the regulars volunteered for mock debates.

Customers like Joe, who can defend cannabis like he's writing a dissertation, and Lisa, who always throws in wild counterpoints just to keep us sharp, have been invaluable. It's evolved into a full-blown community effort. Everyone's rooting for us like we're the home team heading into the playoffs.

During my break, I wandered into the back room and found Eve lounging comfortably, a tray of golden fries from Sterling Feast in front of her. The air smelled warm and inviting — the crisp scent of fries mingled with honey mustard and subtle seasoning.

She looked up as I sat down, offering a smile that felt like an open door.

"Want some?" she asked, nudging the tray closer. Her honey mustard cup sat neatly beside the fries, already half-empty.

I grabbed a few and dipped them in the sauce. "Thanks." The sweet-and-tangy hit my tongue like a small, perfect distraction.

"So," Eve began, popping another fry into her mouth, "how do you manage to speak at both STAND Outreach and Nevermore Lounge?"

Curiosity flickered in her eyes.

I shrugged. "It's easier with STAND. I don't mind speaking against people I dislike. There's some fire behind it." I paused.

"Nevermore's different. More relaxed. Maybe it's the dim lights or the crowd. People sipping drinks don't feel nearly as intimidating as people clutching clipboards."

Eve chuckled softly, and the sound eased some of the tension in my chest.

"You've always been good at handling unexpected situations," she said. "Remember when you talked your way out of that mix-up with Mr. Thompson's order?"

I smiled at the memory. "Yeah. That was pure improvisation. Honestly, half the time I don't know what I'm doing until after I've done it."

"Improvisation's your superpower," she teased, dipping another fry.

Then her tone softened.

"Truth is, I still get butterflies before I speak in front of people. Even small crowds. I cover it with jokes, but it's there."

Her honesty caught me off guard.

For a moment, I saw past her easy humor — the nerves, the doubt underneath. It made her feel real.

Not just confident.

Human.

That admission surprised me. Eve, who always seemed so steady, letting me glimpse a flicker of her own nerves, made her reassurance feel sharper, more real.

For a moment, the worry about the upcoming discussion faded. Then it crept back, like cold air sliding under a door. My brain had already started cataloguing everything that could go wrong: stuttering, blanking out, saying something too weird, or worse, saying nothing at all.

"I just can't shake this feeling... I'm representing Sanctuary. It feels like a lot is riding on me not screwing up."

Eve's gaze softened, steady and calm, anchoring me without even trying. "Don't worry, Samuel. You've got this. You know your stuff, and you've got heart. Just be yourself. That's enough."

I hesitated, then smiled back. "Thanks," I said, meaning it. "Oh, and we're all wearing work uniforms. Keeps it simple, professional."

"Good," she said with mock gravity. "Wouldn't want you showing up in something less respectable. God forbid, imagine you in cargo shorts."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Please don't give Ralph ideas."

She grinned, then softened. "And Neil? How's he holding up?"

"He's... trying. The intensity about STAND and Harrison specifically is tough to rein in. But he's working on it."

Eve drew her brows together. "Well, we're all rooting for him, too. He's got the passion; he just needs to channel it the right way."

Before I got up to leave, she reached over and gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You'll be fine, Samuel. Just try your best, that's all anyone can ask for."

Her words stayed with me as I headed back to the floor. They wrapped around me like a shield, softening the edges of my nerves. The discussion still loomed ahead, but with Eve and the others in my corner, it felt just a little less terrifying.

My phone buzzed. Text from Alice: *Good luck with the debate thing! You got this. Coffee Tuesday still on?*

I smiled. *Yeah, definitely. Thanks.*

Her friendship — easy, uncomplicated even with the ongoing Warner mess — had become one of the steadier parts of my life lately. Between LEAP's final push, Sanctuary shifts, and now this debate in the coming days, having someone who didn't need anything from me except to show up for coffee felt like breathing room.

Looking back now, I can see these final days before the debate were when everything started converging: LEAP winding down, the Champion Initiative decision looming, the debate with STAND approaching, and all the relationships I'd built either solidifying or starting to crack.

But that afternoon, standing behind Sanctuary's counter with Eve's encouragement still warm in my chest and the debate prep happening around me, I just felt ready.

Not confident or particularly certain, but definitely ready.

Chapter Thirty-One

When Dr. Dyer asked me to describe the STAND debate, I started with the facts.

"We argued for cannabis regulation over prohibition," I told him. "Compared it to alcohol. Cited statistics on the failed War on Drugs. Eugene James wore a gold suit that somehow made him look both expensive and ridiculous at the same time."

Dr. Dyer waited.

"That's the truth," I said. "But it's not how I remember it."

He leaned forward slightly. "Then how do you remember it?"

I closed my eyes.

I could've recited the dry version — the one floating around online. But that version leaves out the weight of it. The theatre of it. The way it felt in my chest.

So I told him this version instead.

Week 11 of LEAP

The Debate (Slightly Embellished Version)

The courtroom felt conjured from a gothic fever dream, vaulted ceilings looming like watchful sentinels, beams crisscrossing high above like skeletal fingers, walls lined with ancient tomes whose cracked spines murmured forgotten verdicts. Dust motes drifted lazily through shafts of pale light; the air carried the scent of aged parchment, melted wax, and a subtle undertone of judgment that lingered like an old ghost.

At the center of it all sat Bud Greenly. Shackled. Silent. Smirking.

His trademark green tracksuit, slightly faded now, still carried that defiant energy as if he knew a secret the rest of us were too afraid to ask. Thick iron cuffs circled his wrists, linked by a short chain that clinked with every shift. If STAND had its way, Bud wasn't just on trial tonight. He was about to be erased.

Neil and I flanked him, both in sharp dark-green suits and crisp ties. We weren't just his defense; we were the last line between him and obliteration. Across the aisle, Eugene James and his unfortunate co-counsel sat in garish gold suits, practically sweating smugness under the courtroom's unrelenting gaze.

Neil leaned closer, whispering, "Bro. Did you catch his name?"

The bailiff saved me from asking. "Representing the prosecution: Eugene James and... Cornelius Plimp."

Neil made a sound somewhere between a cough and a suppressed laugh. His shoulders shook violently. I shot him a sharp elbow to the ribs.

"Not helping," I muttered.

Eugene's eyes narrowed into daggers, but his partner, Plimp, tragically kept his chin high, as if his name weren't the courtroom's new punchline.

Bud exhaled dramatically, shaking his head. "Man. Y'all really putting me on trial with a dude named Plimp? That's tragic."

The gallery stifled snickers. Even the Judges' stone-carved faces seemed to twitch ever so slightly, though perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

They sat in towering chairs behind an ornately carved bench; their robes were rich with history. The room pulsed with unspoken

judgment, pressing down on your shoulders whether you were guilty or not.

The trial began.

Eugene rose first. He smoothed his gleaming jacket with deliberate precision, straightened his tie as though cinching up his ego, and strode forward like a man about to drop the mic. Silence pooled around him until it felt almost suffocating.

"Your Honors," he began solemnly, his voice echoing off the vaulted walls, "Tonight, we hold Bud Greenly accountable for centuries of destruction."

He pivoted with calculated drama.

"For generations, he has masqueraded as a friend. A harmless presence. But beneath that façade lies a truth far darker. He has led millions astray. Stolen ambition. Killed productivity. He whispers to the vulnerable, convincing them that idleness is acceptable, that drifting through life is enough."

Cornelius Plimp rose stiffly, clutching his notes as if they might escape him. He cleared his throat with theatrical gravitas, but his voice cracked midway, shattering any illusion of authority.

"Bud Greenly is a disease!" he declared. "He has infected households, robbed young minds of their futures, and turned potential into nothingness!"

Neil shook his head, muttering just loud enough for me to hear, "Man, you'd think Bud started a war."

Bud, ever unfazed, let out a sharp exhale — half-laugh, half-sigh. His eyes drooped, but there was a flicker of something sharper beneath them: a glint of patience, almost wisdom.

Plimp pressed on, his shoes squeaking with each step. "How many students have flunked out of school because of him? How many jobs were lost? How many dreams have died with Bud Greenly in the room?"

Neil couldn't hold it anymore. He barked out a laugh. "You're really out here blaming life choices on a dude in a tracksuit."

Eugene's head snapped toward us, glare sharp enough to cut glass. "Do you find this amusing?"

Neil grinned, unrepentant. "Buddy, you're making it too easy."

I rose next, straightening my jacket — not for drama, but because I was done indulging Eugene's parade of nonsense.

"Your Honors," I began evenly, my voice carrying over the silent courtroom, "the prosecution wants you to believe Bud Greenly is the sole architect of failure. That he's behind every lost job, every missed opportunity, every ruined ambition." I gestured toward Bud, who tilted his head slightly, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips. "But tell me, did Bud take their exams for them?"

Neil stepped forward. "Did Bud call in sick to their job? Was he the one ghosting their responsibilities?"

Bud lifted his cuffed hands and gave a nonchalant shrug, chains rattling softly.

Neil jabbed a finger toward the prosecution. "They say he's always around. Cool. But isn't that just reliability? Dependability? If someone flunks out, maybe, just maybe, it's because they didn't do their damn homework."

"Preach," Bud murmured, his voice lazy but amused.

Plimp's face flushed an alarming shade of red. "You're defending a corrupter! A parasite feeding on the weak!"

Neil spread his hands wide, turning back to the Judges. "Bruh, he's a metaphor."

I took a steady, deliberate breath. "Bud Greenly isn't a villain or a hero. He isn't good or bad. He's a choice." I let the words linger in the vaulted space. "The real issue isn't him — it's moderation. Responsibility. You don't outlaw something because some people misuse it. You educate. You regulate. You give people tools to make better choices."

I gestured subtly toward the gallery, where a man in a sleek, tailored suit sat three rows back, legs crossed, a crystal tumbler of amber liquid in his hand. No cuffs. No accusations. Just quiet amusement.

"Funny," Neil said, tone soft but cutting. "I don't see Alcohol in chains."

The gallery rotated as dozens of eyes followed ours. The man — Alcohol personified — raised his glass with a knowing smirk, as if toasting us.

Eugene bristled. "You're comparing this... menace... to a substance with centuries of cultural history?"

Neil clapped his hands together, the sound echoing like a gavel. "You wanna talk history? America banned alcohol once. How'd that work out? Bootleggers. Crime. Chaos. Sound familiar?"

Eugene's jaw tightened. "At least alcohol."

Neil cut him off with a sharp laugh. "At least alcohol, what? Destroys livers? Tears apart families? Gets people killed on the road? Kinda sounds worse, doesn't it?"

Eugene's voice rose an octave. "We're not here to debate alcohol!"

"Yeah," Neil said, grinning, "because you'd lose."

Eugene exhaled, composure cracking. "You're insufferable."

"And you still can't win an argument," Neil fired back, smirking.

Their back-and-forth sparked murmurs in the gallery until one of the Judges raised a hand, silencing the room with ancient authority.

"Enough."

The three robed figures leaned close, whispers like rustling parchment. The weight of centuries seemed to hang over their deliberation.

Eugene sat stiffly, eyes locked forward. Even Neil quieted, though his foot tapped with restless energy.

Bud, still shackled, leaned back and let out a long, exaggerated yawn. "This is taking forever," he muttered. Beneath the sarcasm, his eyes flicked toward me with something like gratitude.

Neil nudged me with his elbow. "We made our case."

The Judges straightened. One opened their mouth —

And the verdict was this: a tie.

No winner, no loser. Just the clang of a gavel echoing through stone, ringing like balance itself. In a world that demands absolutes, Bud's fate was left hanging between shadow and light.

Maybe that's the point.

I opened my eyes. Dr. Dyer was watching me, expression thoughtful.

"So, in your version," he said quietly, "nobody won."

"Nobody won," I confirmed. "But we didn't lose either. That felt important somehow."

He squinted, making a mental note. "And how did you feel afterward? In reality, not the courtroom version."

I hesitated. "Proud. For a few days, anyway."

"And then?"

I didn't answer right away.

"And then everything else happened," I said finally.

Dr. Dyer waited, patient as always.

"But for those few days," I added, voice quieter, "I let myself believe I'd done something that mattered."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Week 11 of LEAP

Days after the debate, dealing with the aftermath of both the LEAP dinner and the STAND college discussion felt strange, as if I'd stepped into a parallel reality where I was suddenly more visible. I wished this were where everything wrapped up neatly, where the credits rolled, and I could fade into obscurity. Of course, life wasn't that generous. There was still more to navigate.

For days after, I replayed the college discussion in my head — not the real one, but the exaggerated courtroom version in my imagination, where Bud smirked like a villain on trial, and Neil kept shouting, "He's a metaphor!" as if that counted as legal defense. The absurdity softened the weight of it all.

The morning after the debate, I walked into Sanctuary half-expecting everything to feel different. It didn't. Same lavender scent drifting from the diffuser near the register. Same vintage record playing low — Fleetwood Mac, if I had to guess. Same Ruth reorganizing the display case like she was defusing a bomb, each pre-roll positioned with surgical precision.

Ralph looked up from behind the counter. For a long moment, he just stared at me.

Then he smiled — the kind of smile that reached his eyes and crinkled the corners. "So. You didn't embarrass me."

"That was the goal," I said.

He nodded slowly, still smiling. "You did more than that."

Carmen emerged from the back room, carrying a tray of fresh edibles from Sterling Feast She set it down and turned to me, hands on her hips. "I watched the video Neil posted. You actually sounded like you knew what you were talking about."

"High praise," I said dryly.

"Don't get used to it." But she was grinning.

Ruth glanced over from the display case. "Did you really compare cannabis to alcohol?"

"Neil did most of that part."

"Smart," she said. "Eugene probably lost his mind."

"He did," I confirmed.

Ralph chuckled, shaking his head. "I knew you had it in you. Didn't know you'd bring the whole courtroom drama angle, though."

I blinked. "You saw the fantasy version?"

"Neil sent it to half the city, kid. Of course I saw it."

Carmen laughed. "Bud Greenly in shackles. Iconic."

I felt heat creeping up my neck, but it wasn't embarrassment exactly. It was something lighter. Warmer.

"You upheld what we do here," Ralph said, his tone shifting to something more serious. "You stood up for the work. For the people who need this and get judged for it. That matters, Samuel."

I didn't know what to say to that. So I just nodded.

Ralph patted my shoulder once — firmly, grounding — and went back to organizing receipts.

For the first time in a long while, I felt something close to pride.

The rest of the week at Sanctuary was busier than usual. Customers I'd never seen before started coming in, and more than a few mentioned the debate.

Tuesday afternoon, a woman in her mid-forties walked in. Business casual, wedding ring catching the light. She looked around the shop with the cautious curiosity of someone who'd never been in a dispensary before.

"Are you Samuel?" she asked when she reached the counter.

I hesitated. "Yeah?"

"I was at the university discussion. My son's a student there." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "He struggles with anxiety. Traditional medication hasn't worked well for him. I've been... resistant to alternatives."

I waited.

"What you said about education over prohibition. About giving people tools to make informed choices." She exhaled slowly. "That resonated. So I'm here to ask questions. Real ones. Not judgments."

Ruth appeared beside me, already pulling educational materials from beneath the counter. "We can help with that."

The woman stayed for twenty minutes, asking about CBD ratios, dosage recommendations, and potential interactions with other

medications. Ruth handled most of it — she was better at the technical side — but I chimed in when I could.

When she left, she had a small bag of CBD gummies and a printed guide on anxiety management.

"Thank you," she said at the door. "Really."

After she was gone, Ruth turned to me. "You see? That's what happens when people actually listen."

Wednesday brought Joe, the regular who always ordered fries with honey mustard at the diner across the street. He walked in with his usual easygoing energy and grinned when he saw me.

"Yo, debate guy!" he called out. "I saw the video. You killed it."

"Thanks, Joe."

"No, seriously. I've been telling people about it. My cousin's been on the fence about getting his med card, and after watching that, he's finally doing it."

Carmen handed him his usual pre-roll. "Samuel's basically famous now."

"I wouldn't say famous," I muttered.

"Internet famous," Joe corrected, still grinning. "That's a thing."

I shook my head, but I couldn't help smiling.

By Thursday, the impact was undeniable. Sanctuary had a steady stream of new customers, and at least half of them mentioned the debate. Some had attended in person. Others had watched the video online.

One guy — probably mid-twenties, dressed as if he'd just left a tech startup — came in and immediately launched into a critique of Eugene's arguments.

"The alcohol comparison was genius," he said, leaning against the counter. "I've been saying that for years, but no one listens to me. You guys made it sound legitimate."

"It is legitimate," Ruth said flatly.

"Exactly!" He bought three different strains and left a twenty-dollar tip.

Carmen raised an eyebrow as she pocketed the bill. "You're bringing in the tech bros now. Ralph's gonna promote you."

"Please don't."

She laughed. "Too late."

That night, after closing, I sat out back on the narrow bench behind the shop. The air was cool, carrying the faint hum of street traffic and the distant sound of someone's music drifting from an open window.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the messages I'd been ignoring all week.

Aaron: Bro, that debate was fire. STAND didn't know what hit them.

Marcus: You actually made weed sound intellectual, lmao respect.

Neil had sent approximately fifteen messages, most of them memes related to the debate. One was a poorly photoshopped image of Bud Greenly's face superimposed onto a courtroom sketch. I snorted.

There was still nothing from Alice.

I stared at the blank space where her name should've appeared, then put my phone away.

She said she'd text. Maybe she's busy. Maybe she's still figuring things out with Warner. Maybe it doesn't matter.

I leaned back against the wall and let the quiet settle over me.

Six months later, telling Dr. Dyer about this week, I'd realize something I hadn't seen at the time: I'd been happy.

Not ecstatic. Not over-the-moon. Just... quietly content.

For a few days, I'd let myself believe that hard work could pay off. That showing up mattered. That I could do something worth doing and people would notice.

It wouldn't last. But for those few days, it was real.

The final week of LEAP was approaching. The Champion Initiative announcement had to be coming soon — they'd narrowed it down to twelve finalists, and the anticipation was thick enough to cut.

I thought about the hours I'd logged. The tests I'd passed. The effort I'd poured into every session.

For once, I let myself believe things might actually work out.

I even started planning. Not in detail — nothing concrete — but small, hopeful thoughts that felt almost foreign.

Maybe I'd get the Champion Initiative. Maybe the stipend would cover rent for a few months while I figured out the next steps.

Maybe I could try that college employment program again, or something similar. Maybe this time, it'd be different.

I pictured myself in a decent apartment. Not luxury, just stable. A place where the heat worked, and the neighbors didn't scream at 2 a.m. Maybe I'd take that trip to Amsterdam I'd joked about. Sit in some weed-friendly coworking space, espresso in one hand, budgeting quarterly expenses like a stoned spreadsheet samurai.

The thought made me smile.

But reality, as always, had other plans.

Friday morning, I woke up with a strange feeling I couldn't name. Not quite dread, but close. An instinctive unease sat low in my stomach, whispering that something was off.

I ignored it.

LEAP's final week started on Monday. The announcement would come soon after. I just had to make it through a few more days.

You've got this, I told myself.

And for a moment, I believed it.

Looking back, Dr. Dyer would ask me if I knew. If some part of me sensed what was coming.

I'd tell him no. I didn't see it. I didn't want to.

Because for the first time in a long time, I'd let myself hope.

And hope, it turns out, is a dangerous thing to carry when the floor's about to drop out from under you.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Week 11 of LEAP

Breaks at Sanctuary were always strange. Fifteen minutes wasn't enough to do anything useful, but just long enough to get stuck alone with your thoughts if you weren't careful. I sat out back, behind the shop, on a narrow wooden bench that creaked every time I took a breath. The faint hum of street traffic mixed with the soft chatter of customers inside. A whiff of lavender hung in the air, tangled with something earthy drifting from the staff door. Probably the diffuser. Sanctuary was nothing if not committed to the vibe — warm, grounded, and unapologetically itself in every corner.

I'd been working here part-time long enough that the weirdness of it all had started to feel almost normal. The irony wasn't lost on me. I spent my shifts surrounded by regulars who came in for community as much as cannabis, and somehow this place — with its deep green walls and open-mic nights — had become one of the few places I actually felt like I belonged.

From my backpack, I pulled out the chocolate box from the LEAP banquet. Still sealed in its black ribbon, the kind of packaging that makes you hesitate, as if whatever was inside needed a special occasion to justify opening it. But then I remembered Alice was coming by.

I tugged the ribbon loose, flipped the lid, and stared at the rows of chocolates as if they were tiny pieces of art — gold leaf, a miniature violin sculpture, one with a real flower petal pressed into it.

Her voice floated over before I saw her.

"So... this is what luxury looks like now?"

Alice strolled up, casual as ever. A loose green jacket draped over her gray T-shirt, jeans tucked into scuffed boots. Her hair was slightly windblown, like she'd walked too far and didn't care.

I slid the box aside, feigning nonchalance. "Depends. You planning to save judgment for later?"

"Only if you're saving that for someone special."

I tilted my head. "Nah. Just someone with good taste and no moral objections to overpriced desserts."

She laughed and dropped onto the bench beside me. "Fair enough."

I nudged the box toward her. "Pick one. I think a few are dusted in gold. Or lies."

Alice examined the selection as if she were curating a museum exhibit. "This looks like something you'd steal from a billionaire's minibar."

I watched her choose one with a ruby-red swirl and take a slow bite.

"Holy shit," she said, eyes widening. "That's... aggressively good."

"Yeah, LEAP doesn't hold back when they're bribing you into believing hard work pays off."

She chewed thoughtfully, still eyeing the box. "You ever think it's weird? They give you these fancy chocolates and expect you to just... go back to being normal after."

I met her gaze. "Define normal."

She shrugged. "You know. Regular. Mundane. Like we sat in a chandelier-lit room with steak and music, and now I'm eating gold candy behind a dispensary."

"Romantic setting," I said.

"Top-tier ambiance."

We both smiled.

There was something about breaks like this. No rush. No pressure. Just quiet sarcasm and space to exist without performing. I could hear the faint clink of dishes from inside, the low murmur of customers, and it felt like the world had softened just for a moment.

Alice reached for another chocolate but hesitated. "This okay?"

"Help yourself. I've been saving it, but honestly... better to share than find it in my bag during a panic spiral next week."

She laughed softly. "You're more honest than most people I know."

"Don't have the energy for anything else."

She picked another, streaked with brushed gold. As she bit in, her eyes closed briefly, like the taste short-circuited her thoughts.

"That box might be the reason I got this job," I said after a beat.

"The director handed it to me like I'd won a silent auction. A few days later, I was hired."

Alice glanced between me and the chocolates, her smile tugging sideways. "So... you got hired through candy diplomacy?"

"Pretty much."

We sat there for a while, just eating. Nothing dramatic. A good bench, better chocolate, and the kind of company that didn't need to fill the silence with words.

The break clock beeped one sharp note, cutting through the quiet, reminding me I was still on the clock.

Alice nudged me lightly. "Guess you're going back in."

I nodded. "Guess so."

She stood, brushing at her jacket like there was dust only she could see. "Thanks for the chocolate. And the bench."

"Thanks for showing up."

She looked at me a second longer than necessary, then half-turned, like she was ready to leave.

I started sliding the chocolate box back into my bag, not rushing, just figuring the moment was over. But before I could close it all the way, Alice brushed up beside me.

She leaned in slightly and plucked another chocolate from the tray, like she owned the right. "Neil sent me the video, by the way."

I blinked. "The debate?"

"Yeah. You two actually looked like you knew what you were doing."

I laughed softly, easing the box into my bag but not sealing it this time. "Honestly? I thought I was going to fumble the mic. But it went better than I expected."

She smiled. "It worked. You looked... composed. Focused. I was kind of impressed."

"Kind of?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Don't get carried away," she said with a grin. "But yeah. You held your own. Like it actually mattered to you."

"It did. Which was weird." I paused. "Usually, public stuff like that, I'm just trying to survive it. But this one... I don't know. It felt like I was saying something worth hearing."

She didn't answer right away. Just watched me. Not distracted. Not filling the air with filler. She was actually there.

"Doesn't surprise me," she said finally.

"Really?"

"Yeah. You act like you don't care about much, but then something pulls you in, and you show up like you've been rehearsing it for weeks."

I shrugged. Didn't know what to do with that. It wasn't quite a compliment, but it landed like one.

A breeze stirred the lavender pots near the back steps, carrying the faint hum of street traffic and distant conversation from the shop. Alice leaned back, arms draped over her knees.

"So, what's next for you?" she asked. "Now that you're basically LEAP's golden boy?"

I laughed under my breath. "Don't jinx it."

She smirked. "Come on, you already know it's yours."

I didn't answer right away. The question felt like stepping onto a frozen pond — thin ice everywhere.

"Make some money," I said eventually. "Save most of it. Maybe try that college employment program again, or something similar. Depends on what I can handle this time."

There was a pause long enough to let the unspoken fill it.

Alice glanced at me. "You burned out?"

I gave a slight nod. "Yeah."

She didn't ask how, when, or what it looked like. She just stayed.

"That happens," she said quietly. "People act like it means you failed, but honestly, knowing when to step away is the only reason I've lasted this long."

"You ever think about quitting?" I asked.

"Every two weeks," she said, deadpan. "Then something shifts, and suddenly I'm in it again."

"Sounds dramatic."

She rolled her eyes. "It's supposed to be dramatic."

We sat like that, talking without pushing, listening without fixing — the kind of conversation where no one kept score.

I reached for another chocolate and took a bite. Hazelnut, maybe. Or something fancier pretending to be a hazelnut.

Alice tilted her head. "You ever think you'll stop pretending not to care about things?"

I glanced at her. "You ever stop pretending sherbet's real ice cream?"

She pointed at me. "Don't change the subject."

I smiled — small, unguarded. "I don't know. Caring makes stuff complicated."

"Not caring doesn't make it simple."

I nodded. She was right, but I wasn't about to say it out loud. Not yet.

Instead, I sat back, knowing she'd stay a few more minutes before heading off. And knowing I wouldn't mind if she came back again sometime.

She reached for another chocolate, then stopped halfway, fingers brushing the edge of the box. Her eyes locked on mine and didn't move.

"You're not what I expected," she said.

"That makes two of us."

Neither of us looked away. No music swelled, no cinematic lighting shift.

She leaned in a little. So did I.

We kissed.

It was soft. Brief. The kind of kiss that doesn't try to prove anything — one that asks if it's okay to happen. And it was.

She pulled back slowly, still close. Her eyes searched my face, not unsure, just checking in. I stayed still, letting it settle.

She smiled faintly, not saying anything.

And honestly, I didn't have anything clever to say back. We didn't fill the quiet.

Looking back, I'd tell Dr. Dyer that kiss was the best and worst timing of my life. Best because it was real — no performance, no pretending, just two people being honest for three seconds. Worst because I had no idea what was coming. If I had, I might've held onto that moment longer.

She pulled back another inch, her eyes still on mine, but with something different behind them now — less play, more weight. Her hand hovered near the box between us, but didn't reach for it again.

Alice exhaled softly and sat back. "I should go."

I didn't move. "Yeah?"

She nodded once. "Yeah."

The way she said it wasn't cold, and it wasn't an excuse. It was careful. Like she didn't want to lie, but she also didn't want to unpack everything sitting underneath that moment. I didn't ask. I didn't try to talk her out of it. That wasn't the kind of night this was turning into.

She glanced down, fingers twisting together. "Warner and I... we're not together anymore. Officially. But it's messy. And I need to actually end it properly, cleanly before I can..." She trailed off.

"Before you can start something else," I finished quietly.

She met my eyes. "Yeah."

I nodded. "That's fair."

She looked at me for a beat longer, like she was making sure I meant it. Then she stood slowly, brushing off her jeans like she needed her hands to do something.

"This wasn't a mistake," she said quietly. "Just... complicated."

"I figured," I said.

Alice's hand hovered like she wanted to say more, but then it fell. She stepped back.

"I'll text you," she said.

"Alright."

Alice turned and walked toward the street, her pace steady, not rushed. She didn't glance back. I stayed put, the chocolate box still in my hands, now a little lopsided from where we'd picked at it. The quiet folded in around me.

It wasn't disappointment exactly. Just a shift. The kind you feel in your ribs more than your head. She was still working something out, and I wasn't the type to demand answers before someone was ready to give them.

I leaned against the wall and watched the sky settle into its soft blue-gray hue, the color it assumes before the streetlights come to life. The air around Sanctuary still carried that familiar trace of lavender and cedar — someone must've just refreshed the diffusers. I'd worked here long enough that the scent barely registered most days. Tonight, it lingered.

I looked down at the half-eaten chocolate in my hand, the one Alice had chosen but never finished.

Sweet. Clean edges. A slight bitterness at the end.

That kiss? It was like that, too. Not planned and not regretted.

We weren't trying to define anything. It just... happened — maybe because we both needed something honest for once. Something real, even if it didn't come with a clear label.

She hadn't said Warner's name until the end, but it had hovered there the whole time, like a glass on the edge of a counter no one wanted to catch. You don't walk away clean from feelings, not when they drag behind you like knots in old rope.

And I wasn't trying to be her escape.

Still, I didn't regret it. Not the kiss. Not the chocolate. Not sitting out here behind Sanctuary like the closing shot of a weird indie short film.

Sometimes moments didn't need a conclusion. They just needed space.

I glanced at the empty spot on the bench beside me, then down at the box again. A few of the chocolates were cracked along the edges — not from rough handling, but from time and pressure. Funny how even something so fancy could still break like anything else.

I set the lid back on and pressed it gently into place.

It was sweet, I thought, my thumb tracing over the gold foil seal she'd peeled halfway open. *Brief. Like the chocolate she didn't finish.*

She said she'd text.

I believed her.

Two days later, my phone would stay silent. I'd tell myself she needed space to handle things with Warner, that she was being responsible. That the silence didn't mean regret.

My brain would start running scenarios anyway. That's what it did best.

The kiss. The timing. The complication.

I didn't regret it.

But part of me wished I'd known to slow down. To let the moment breathe instead of assuming there would be more just like it.

Sometimes you don't recognize something as rare until it's already over.

When I stood up, the bench didn't creak. Like it hadn't noticed she was gone either.

Then I went back inside.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Week 11 of LEAP

I knew we had finally reached this point, though the signs had been there since the start of the day. Even before that, Alice hadn't texted. No reply. Not even a quick acknowledgment. Two days of silence. At first, I told myself she was busy, that it didn't matter. But the absence lingered, quiet and sharp — a little reminder that not everything was in my control.

It began with my alarms failing, except for the 4 a.m. one, which jolted me awake in a panic. My heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to break out. For one irrational moment, I half-wondered if this was how people my age quietly dropped dead: one nasty jolt and game over. A twenty-something with no prior health conditions found dead in bed with a malfunctioning alarm clock as the primary suspect.

My brain immediately started running simulations. Cardiac arrest probability in males 20-25 with no family history: statistically negligible. Anxiety-induced tachycardia: significantly higher. Likelihood I was overreacting: approaching certainty.

I sat up, taking deep breaths until my heart rate returned to normal. Four a.m. The rest of my alarms — the ones actually set for a reasonable hour — had somehow deactivated overnight. I checked my phone three times to confirm I wasn't hallucinating.

No messages from Alice.

I pushed the thought away and stumbled into the bathroom.

The morning routine felt surreal, like moving through water. I kept checking the time, calculating whether I could still make it on time

if I hurried. The math worked out barely, but the panic had already settled into my chest — a low-grade anxiety that wouldn't dissipate.

While shaving, I nicked my lip. Just a small cut, but it carried a strange weight. Blood welled up, bright red against my skin. I stared at my reflection, dabbing at it with a tissue.

Champions bleed before breakfast, I thought, trying for humor. It didn't land, even in my own head.

The cut wouldn't stop bleeding. I pressed tissue against it, watching red seep through white fibers. My brain catalogued it as data: minor injury, capillary damage, coagulation time 2-5 minutes. But something about it felt like an omen I didn't want to acknowledge.

I threw on my best shirt — the one I'd been saving for the Champion Initiative announcement. Dark blue, pressed the night before, no wrinkles. I looked at myself in the mirror one more time.

"You've got this," I said aloud. My voice sounded hollow in the empty apartment.

You've logged the hours. Passed the tests. Done everything right. This is just nerves.

The walk to LEAP felt longer than usual. My mind kept drifting to the announcement that had to be coming soon. They'd narrowed it down to twelve finalists. Now, presumably, to one Champion.

I ran the numbers in my head: completion rate, test scores, attendance record. I'd been meticulous. If LEAP was actually merit-based — and I had to believe it was — then I had a real shot.

Aaron's consistent. Marcus is solid. But I've put in the work.

For once, I let myself believe things might actually work out.

When I arrived, the building felt different. I couldn't pinpoint it immediately — same fluorescent lighting, same sterile hallways, same faint smell of industrial cleaning solution and burnt coffee — but the atmosphere was somehow off.

Aaron was already at his usual spot near the coffee station, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when I walked in.

"Yo, Sam. You good?"

"Yeah. Why?"

He shrugged. "You look stressed."

"Alarm malfunction. Woke up at four."

Marcus appeared beside us, holding a protein bar he clearly hadn't paid for. "Bro, that's tragic. You want my coffee? I haven't touched it yet."

"I'm good."

The three of us stood there in the awkward pre-session lull, the kind of silence that should've felt normal but instead carried a strange tension.

That's when I heard it.

Two voices, low and urgent, coming from the hallway near the administrative offices. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop; they were just loud enough to catch.

"Termination this morning. Security's handling it."

My brain filed the words away before I could stop it. *Termination.*
This morning.

Aaron caught it, too. His eyebrows lifted slightly. "Someone's getting fired?"

Marcus took a bite of his protein bar, unbothered. "Probably attendance. You know how strict they are about that."

I nodded, but something cold settled in my stomach. I told myself it was nothing. People get let go from programs all the time — miss too many days, fail assessments, violate policies. It happened.

Not to people who show up every day. Not to people who pass everything.

I pushed the thought away.

The morning session started normally. Training modules, group discussions, the usual routine. But the tension I'd felt earlier hadn't dissipated. If anything, it had spread.

Whispers.

They started subtly — someone leaning over to another finalist, a quick murmur before returning to their work. Then another. And another.

I caught fragments:

"Heard it's substances."

"During program hours."

"Can't believe they'd risk it this close to the end."

My chest tightened. I kept my eyes on my screen, forcing myself to focus on the module in front of me. *Financial planning for small business owners*. Riveting.

"You hearing this?" Aaron asked under his breath.

"Hearing what?"

"Everyone's talking about someone getting fired for weed or some shit."

I didn't look up. "Probably just rumors."

But my brain was already running scenarios. Who would bring substances to LEAP? Who would be stupid enough to use during program hours? None of the finalists seemed that reckless.

Marcus leaned back in his chair, stretching. "Man, whoever it is, that's just dumb. We're this close to the finish line."

I agreed, but the unease wouldn't leave.

Then I felt eyes on me.

I glanced up. A few rows over, someone was staring. When I made eye contact, they quickly looked away, leaning toward the person next to them to whisper something.

My stomach dropped.

No.

Another person glanced in my direction, then quickly back at their screen.

No, this doesn't make sense.

I looked at Aaron. He was watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Concern? Confusion?

"Sam," he said quietly. "What's going on?"

"I don't know."

But I did know. Or at least, my brain was rapidly assembling possibilities — none of them good.

I work at a dispensary. Someone could've reported that.

I've never used it during LEAP. Never. Not once.

This has to be a misunderstanding.

The session dragged on. Every minute felt like an hour. I couldn't focus. My hands were cold. My chest felt tight. I kept checking my phone under the desk — no messages, no alerts, nothing that would explain the growing dread.

Finally, the session ended. I stood up quickly, ready to leave, ready to get out of the building and away from the stares.

That's when I saw them.

Two security officers. Standing near the entrance to the training room. Waiting.

I watched as their eyes swept across the room, then locked onto me.

No.

"Samuel." One of them stepped forward, voice flat and professional. "Gather your belongings. You need to come with us."

The room went silent.

Every head turned. Every pair of eyes found me.

I couldn't move. My brain stalled out completely, unable to process what was happening.

"Now, please," the officer repeated.

My hands shook as I packed my bag. Laptop. Notebook. Pen. Water bottle. Each item felt impossibly heavy. The silence in the room was deafening. No one spoke, no one moved — they just watched.

I could feel their stares burning into me. Judging. Wondering.

What did he do?

I knew something was off about him.

He seemed too quiet. Too different.

Aaron stood up. "Yo, what's going on?"

One of the officers held up a hand. "This doesn't concern you. Sit down."

"Sam," Marcus started.

"Sit down," the officer repeated, sharper this time.

I zipped my bag closed. My throat felt like it was closing up. I couldn't look at anyone. Couldn't speak.

The walk through the building was a blur. Security on either side of me, their presence marking me as something dangerous — something that needed to be escorted. We passed other finalists in the hallway. They stared. Whispered.

Someone's phone was out, subtly angled toward me.

They're recording this.

By tomorrow, everyone would know. Everyone who'd been in LEAP, everyone who'd heard about the program, everyone in the extended network of people who loved gossip.

Samuel got fired. Samuel got kicked out. Did you hear what he did?

The hallways felt longer than they'd ever been. Each step echoed. My vision started to tunnel, the edges blurring.

We reached the administrative wing. The Director's office.

One of the officers opened the door.

Inside, the room felt impossibly small — crowded by the Director, Assistant Director, Program Coordinator, and Head Training Instructor. Four people. All standing. All watching me.

The air felt heavy. The silence was sharp.

I stood there, bag still on my shoulder, and waited.

The Director fixed me with a steady gaze. His expression was unreadable — professional detachment masking whatever he actually thought.

"Samuel," he began, voice measured. "I want to start by saying that I'm truly disappointed."

The words hit like a physical blow.

"You've shown great promise throughout this program. Your test scores, your attendance, and your engagement are all exemplary." He paused. "Which makes this all the more unfortunate."

My chest tightened. *Unfortunate?*

"Reports have surfaced," he continued, "that leave us with no choice but to terminate your participation in LEAP, effective immediately."

The floor felt like it was tilting.

"Your termination is due to confirmed use of unauthorized substances during program hours."

The words didn't register at first. My brain scrambled, trying to make sense of the sentence.

Unauthorized substances?

Confirmed?

During program hours?

"That's—" My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again.

"That's not possible. There must be a mistake."

The Director's expression didn't change. "The decision is final."

"But I never—" I stopped, realizing how defensive I sounded. How guilty.

My mind raced. *What substances? When? Where? I work at a dispensary, but I've never used anything during LEAP. Never. Not once.*

"Can I see the evidence?" I asked, hating how small my voice sounded. "Whatever report you have, I need to know what I'm being accused of."

The Assistant Director stepped forward. "That's not necessary. The investigation has concluded."

"But I have a right to know."

"Samuel." The Director's voice cut through mine. "This isn't a negotiation. The appropriate parties have reviewed the evidence. The decision stands."

I felt like I was drowning. "I don't understand. I've followed every rule. I've never brought anything to the program. I've never used anything during program hours. I work at a legal dispensary, but that's separate. I've never—"

"The details are in your termination notice." The Director slid a pink slip across the desk.

I stared at it. Bright pink. Official letterhead. My name was printed at the top.

*Termination Notice: Violation of Program Policies —
Unauthorized Substance Use*

My hands shook as I picked it up. The words blurred together.

"This is standard procedure," the Director continued, his tone shifting to something rehearsed. "We expect you to adhere to the conditions outlined in the notice. Should you need assistance with resources or next steps, contact information is provided."

Resources. Next steps.

Like there was a guidebook for having your entire future pulled out from under you.

"I didn't do this," I said quietly, more to myself than to them. "I didn't do what you're accusing me of."

No one responded.

The Program Coordinator glanced at the security officers still standing by the door. A silent signal.

"We'll escort you out," one of them said.

I nodded stiffly. There was nothing left to say. They weren't going to listen. They'd already decided.

I stood on numb legs and walked toward the door.

Behind me, the Director's voice followed. "We wish you the best in your future endeavors, Samuel."

The words felt hollow. Meaningless.

I didn't look back.

The walk out of the building was worse than the walk in.

Every step felt like a public execution. We passed classrooms where sessions were still ongoing. People glanced up through the windows, saw me flanked by security, and immediately pulled out their phones.

In the main hallway, I saw Aaron and Marcus. They must've ditched their session.

Aaron's face was a mix of shock and anger. "Bro, what the hell is happening?"

I couldn't answer. My throat was too tight.

Marcus stepped forward. "This is bullshit. They can't just—"

"Let's go," one of the officers said, voice firm.

"Sam," Aaron started.

But I was already moving past them, my legs operating on autopilot. I couldn't look at them. Couldn't let them see whatever expression was on my face.

We pushed through the exit doors.

Cold air hit me like a slap. I sucked in a breath, and it came out shaky.

The officers stopped at the edge of the property. "You're no longer permitted on LEAP premises," one of them said. "If you return, it will be considered trespassing."

I nodded.

They turned and walked back inside, leaving me alone on the sidewalk.

My phone buzzed. Text from Aaron: *Wtf just happened???*

Another from Marcus: *This doesn't make sense, bro. Call me.*

I stared at the messages, then shoved my phone back in my pocket.

I couldn't answer them. Not yet. Not when I didn't have answers myself.

I walked for a while, aimlessly. My brain felt disconnected from my body, as if I were watching myself from a distance.

The confidence I'd woken up with — the belief that I had the Champion Initiative in the bag, that all my work had finally paid off — felt like a cruel joke now.

Nearly all my savings went toward this program. Rent is barely covered for the next month. Food budget is tight. No backup plan.

And for what?

I found a bench somewhere — I don't even remember where — and sat down.

That's when the migraine hit.

It started as a pulse behind my left eye, steady and insistent. Then it spread — a blossoming pain that blurred my vision at the edges and made the sunlight feel like knives.

I pressed my palms against my temples, trying to will it away.

It had been months since the last one. I'd thought they were gone. I'd thought I'd left them behind with middle school, with foster care, with all the other things I'd tried to outrun.

But here it was again. The same sharp, relentless pain. The same nausea rising in my throat.

I pulled the pink slip out of my bag and stared at it.

Termination Notice.

My name. My failure. Printed in official font.

I thought about everything I'd done. Every test passed. Every hour logged. Every rule followed.

And none of it mattered.

Someone had accused me of something I didn't do. And no one had bothered to listen.

Was it STAND? Eugene James retaliating after the debate?

Was it someone at Sanctuary? A complaint about me working at a dispensary?

Was it just random? Wrong place, wrong time, wrong person?

I didn't know. And I'd never find out.

The migraine pounded harder.

My phone buzzed again. More texts from Aaron. From Marcus.

Still nothing from Alice.

I turned off my phone and sat there, the pink slip crumpled in my fist, the migraine consuming everything else.

The program I'd poured myself into — gone.

The future I'd started to believe in — gone.

The quiet pride I'd felt just this morning — gone.

All of it, just... gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Present Day---

I walked into Dr. Dyer's office slower than usual. I noticed it. I was sure he noticed it, too. The room hadn't changed. Same bookshelves, same neatly arranged desk, same faint lavender drifting from the diffuser near the window. Somehow, it felt less important now.

I let out a breath and let my eyes wander over the desk, landing on a stress ball near the edge. I picked it up without thinking, rolling it between my fingers — just enough weight to feel real, just enough resistance to keep my hands busy. I didn't squeeze it. I didn't look up either. My brain was already cataloguing the possible fillers: sand? Microbeads? Anything to avoid the actual reason I was here.

I wasn't in the mood for this today.

Dr. Dyer let the silence hang for a beat. "You seem quiet today."

I shrugged. "Not much to say." The truth: I usually had a lot to think about, just not a lot I felt like packaging into words.

He leaned back slightly, expression calm. "Fair enough. But today's session isn't about saying much. It's about how you've been feeling."

I set the stress ball down and folded my arms, shifting as if trying to solve the puzzle of the chair's least uncomfortable position.

"...Right."

He didn't push. Dr. Dyer was skilled at letting silence do the work — letting it fill the space until it felt heavier than words could express.

"Let's start simple," he said. "When did this start?"

I blinked. "What, the bad mood?"

There was the faintest twitch of his mustache — an almost-smile, gone as soon as it appeared. "The depression."

I glanced off to the side, focusing past his shoulder. "I don't know."

He waited. When I didn't elaborate, he asked, "Can't pinpoint it?"

I shook my head. "It's not like it showed up one day." My brain liked clean cause-and-effect: A plus B equals C, but this didn't fit any neat equation.

He gave a slow nod, glancing briefly at his notes. "That's something a lot of people describe."

I tapped my fingers once against the armrest, stopping when I realized I was doing it. "I just started feeling tired all the time. Even after sleeping." I exhaled sharply through my nose. "Stopped caring about things. Didn't even notice at first. Thought it was just... normal. Everyone's stressed, right?"

He didn't interrupt.

I risked a look at him. "Yeah."

He watched me for a moment, and for reasons I couldn't name, I felt a little lighter. His hand moved idly over the edge of a notebook, but he didn't write anything down.

My eyes drifted to the bookshelf near his shoulder. *The Feeling Good Handbook* sat wedged between *The Body Keeps the Score* and *Mind Over Mood*. I'd seen those titles online in self-help articles I skimmed but never actually read. My brain automatically noted the pattern of three books promising repair, each in a

different tone. A neat little trilogy of hope stacked six feet away.
Yeah, thanks, bookshelf. I'm cured.

I dropped my gaze before he noticed.

"Any idea when you first felt this way?" he asked again, evenly.

I hesitated, jaw tightening. "Not really. No big origin story. No one huge moment that flipped a switch."

But after a pause, the words slipped out anyway. "If I had to guess... maybe middle school?"

Dr. Dyer tilted his head slightly. "What makes you say that?"

I let my head fall back against the chair, staring at the ceiling light. It wasn't harsh, but my eyes stung anyway.

"I was always tired. Like, always. No matter how much I slept. And I just... stopped caring about things." My voice went quieter. "That's when I guess it started."

I tapped my fingers on the chair, slow, rhythmic. I didn't notice then. Only in hindsight did it stand out.

Dr. Dyer gave a slight nod, letting me keep going.

"Teachers thought I was just lazy. They'd call on me, and I'd be zoning out. Or they'd ask why I wasn't participating, why I wasn't 'applying myself.'" I scoffed softly. "I didn't even have an answer. Wasn't like I was doing it on purpose — I just didn't have it in me."

"Did anyone notice?" he asked gently.

I let out a short laugh, shaking my head. "No. I got the usual 'you need to try harder' speech. That's about it."

His eyes flicked to me, steady but not intrusive. "And the migraines?"

I frowned slightly, surprised he remembered. "Yeah," I said. "Started around then. Figured it was stress or something. But looking back..." I shrugged. "Maybe it was more."

Dr. Dyer let the silence settle like he always did, leaving room for my words to hang.

"You said you thought it was normal," he said after a moment. "Feeling that way."

"Yeah." I exhaled. "Thought everyone felt like that. Always tired, disconnected, not caring about anything. Figured that was just life."

"And now?"

I hesitated, shifting in the chair. "Now I know better." I let out a slow breath, rubbing my thumb over the edge of my jeans. "Doesn't really change much, though."

His expression stayed even, but I could feel him weighing my words.

"And what about more recently?" Dr. Dyer asked, his tone gentle but direct. "The termination from LEAP — did that trigger these same feelings, or intensify them?"

I curled my fingers together in my lap. "Both, I guess. It wasn't like the depression started with LEAP. But losing that..." I paused, searching for the right words. "Yeah. It brought everything back. Middle school all over again — feeling like a failure, like I'd screwed up somehow, even when I didn't understand what I'd done wrong."

"Those parallels make sense," Dr. Dyer said quietly. "The loss of control. The confusion. Being judged without understanding why."

I nodded, staring at my hands. "I spent weeks working toward that. Months. Gave up nearly all my savings. And then it was just... gone. Ten minutes in an office, and everything I'd built disappeared."

"How did that feel?"

I let out a bitter laugh. "Like someone pulled the floor out from under me. Like I'd been standing on ice the whole time and didn't know it until I fell through."

He waited, giving me space to continue.

"I knew what I was working toward," I said eventually. "I knew the steps. And then... nothing. Just back to square one with less money and more questions."

Dr. Dyer's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes softened. "So the firing didn't just take away the program. It took away your sense of direction."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Exactly."

My gaze drifted to the wall near the bookshelf. I'd never noticed the posters before, but today one caught my eye: *Your thoughts are not always facts.*

Sure. Try telling my brain that, I thought. Real groundbreaking stuff, wall.

I looked back at Dr. Dyer before the slight smirk tugging at my lips betrayed me.

"So," he said, measured, "if you know better now, does that mean you believe it can change?"

I hesitated again, staring at the floor. Then, almost inaudible, I said, "I don't know."

"That's an honest answer," he said.

I crossed my arms, exhaling through my nose. "It's the only one I've got."

Dr. Dyer didn't write it down. Just nodded.

For a moment, the silence felt... different. Not heavy. Not empty. Just there. Something I didn't have to fight.

He glanced at his notes. "You said before certain things make it worse."

I blinked. "Make what worse?"

"The way you feel. The depression. The weight of it." He tilted his head slightly. "Can you give me an example?"

I frowned, exhaling through my nose. My eyes flicked again to the infographic pinned to the wall: *Self-awareness is the first step to change.*

Thanks for the pep talk, poster, I thought dryly. *Like I hadn't already been holding committee meetings with myself for years.*

"It's not things," I muttered finally. "It's... me."

Dr. Dyer didn't move, didn't react. Just let me sit with it.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I overthink everything. Every mistake. Every dumb thing I ever said. Every time I embarrassed

myself. My brain thinks I need to relive it all. A catalog no one asked for."

He nodded. "The 'cringe' cycle."

I arched a brow. "That's a thing?"

"More common than you think," he said. "Replaying past mistakes. Feeling shame or regret long after it's over. Your mind treats those moments like they're still happening."

I exhaled slowly, leaning forward, elbows on my knees. "It's not just 'replaying.' It's like my brain hoards them. Keeps a vault of my screw-ups and cracks it open just to remind me. Organized like a librarian, but only for humiliation."

"And when it stacks up like that," he said gently, "what happens?"

I hesitated.

"It gets loud," I admitted. "Loud enough that sometimes I just want it to stop. Not in a dramatic way. Just... quiet. That's usually when it gets dangerous."

Dr. Dyer didn't flinch. "Dangerous how?"

I stared at the floor.

"That's when the old thoughts creep back in. The ones that say maybe the easiest way to shut it off is not to be here." I shrugged faintly. "I've never been good at sitting with that kind of noise."

The room stayed steady. No alarm. No panic. Just presence.

"Thank you for telling me that," he said.

I swallowed once, then leaned back again, as if the chair had suddenly grown heavier.

"Tell me about one," Dr. Dyer said.

I hesitated, fingers curling together in my lap. "One what?"

"A moment. Something your mind replays." His voice wasn't pushing, just waiting.

I stared down at my hands, a small knot forming in my chest. "It's dumb."

He didn't say anything.

I sighed. "It was a school assignment. Middle school. We had to do a project on someone or something important. Most kids picked a parent, a teacher, or a historical figure. Something that made sense."

My fingers twitched before I clasped them tight. "For some reason... I picked a wrestling game."

Dr. Dyer waited patiently, like he knew the words would come if he left enough space.

"I thought it would impress people," I muttered, rubbing the side of my jaw. "I wasn't even that into wrestling. But I got up there, stood in front of the class, and talked about it like it was the most important thing in the world. My brain was just desperate for that approval."

He tilted his head slightly. "And how'd that go?"

I scoffed. "No idea. Don't even remember how people reacted. Just remember sitting down and feeling stupid."

"And you still think about it?"

"Years later," I said under my breath. "Like I'll be doing something completely unrelated, and suddenly my brain's like, 'Hey, remember that time you did an entire project on a wrestling game for no reason?' And boom. Full-body embarrassment."

Dr. Dyer studied me for a long moment. "What do you think would happen if you stopped caring about that memory?"

I frowned slightly. "I don't know. My brain would probably just swap in the next dumb file from the archive."

"Do you think your classmates still remember it?"

"Of course not."

"So why does it still matter to you?"

A knot tightened in my stomach. "Because it was embarrassing. Because I looked stupid."

"Looked stupid to whom?"

My jaw tightened, but I didn't answer.

He let the silence stretch, unhurried. "So even small mistakes feel like big ones in your head."

"Yeah." My voice came out flat.

"And does your brain ever remind you of the good things you've done?"

A short laugh escaped before I could stop it. "Nope."

His mustache twitched faintly — the slightest flicker of amusement, maybe resignation. "So your brain is selective."

I stared at the floor, my heel tapping once, twice. "Guess so." My mind immediately filed the thought away — *selective memory: great for trivia, terrible for self-esteem.*

"It sounds like your mind holds onto your mistakes because it thinks it needs to. But what if that's just a habit?"

"You're saying I trained my brain to do this?" I asked, though part of me was already running simulations in the back of my head: if A, then B; if B, then C, never quite reaching Z.

"Not intentionally," he said. "But thoughts follow patterns. Reinforce self-criticism enough times, and your brain creates shortcuts back to those memories. The more you replay them, the stronger the connection gets."

I let out a slow breath, tempted to argue — to test the logic. "So how do I stop?"

His gaze stayed steady. "You start by realizing that just because your brain tells you something, it doesn't mean it's true."

I didn't answer right away. My eyes drifted to the poster on the far wall — another pastel-colored pep talk in block letters: *You are not your worst thoughts.*

Sure, poster. If that worked, we'd all be cured by office décor. Still, some skeptical part of me tucked it away — *maybe true, in theory.*

Dr. Dyer's voice cut gently into my thoughts. "Have you ever thought about... not being here?"

The question landed like a stone in water, rippling outward. My shoulders tightened; my fingers dug into my jeans.

Direct question. No metaphor, no buffer. I appreciated the efficiency, even as my chest ached under it.

"I mean... yeah," I said finally, my voice low.

Dr. Dyer didn't flinch or shift uncomfortably. He just let the words hang there, as if they belonged in the room.

"Recently?" he asked.

I exhaled, counting ceiling tiles instead of meeting his eyes. "Not really," I admitted. Then, after a pause, "Not in a serious way."

"Not in a serious way," he echoed softly. "What does that mean to you?"

I rubbed a hand down my face, pressing against my eyes before letting it drop. "I don't know. It's not like I sit around making plans or anything." A crooked smile tugged at my mouth. "I just... wouldn't care if something happened to me. That's all."

He didn't rush to fill the silence, which made me feel both exposed and safe.

"That's still something we should talk about," he said after a moment.

I scoffed, shaking my head. "There's nothing to talk about. It's not like I'd ever do anything."

"You've felt that way before, though," he said gently. Not accusing. Just stating it.

My jaw tightened slightly.

"I told you," I said quietly. "There were times when it got worse. When it wasn't just passive." I swallowed. "I'm not there now. But I know what it feels like when I start sliding toward it."

His expression didn't sharpen. If anything, it steadied.

"You think I'm suicidal," I said flatly.

"I think you feel like life just happens to you," he said gently.

"Like you're more of a bystander than a participant."

That stung more than I wanted to admit. He wasn't wrong. I frowned, lips pressed thin.

Dr. Dyer leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "You said you wouldn't care if something happened to you. What does that look like?"

I squeezed the stress ball, watching it bulge between my fingers. "Like if a car swerved off the road and hit me, I wouldn't panic about it."

I paused, picturing it in grainy black-and-white — some detached thought experiment.

"I wouldn't fight it, either."

He nodded slowly. "And why do you think that is?"

I let the stress ball fall back to the table with a soft thud. "Because it'd be easier, I guess."

"Easier than what?"

My eyes flicked to the bookshelf, where *The Gifts of Imperfection* leaned, trapped between two larger hardcovers like the middle child of self-help.

"Than all of this," I said quietly. "Than trying to rebuild after LEAP. Than figuring out what comes next when the plan I spent months working toward got destroyed in ten minutes."

He didn't respond right away. Just waited, letting me sit with it.

"I'm not here to tell you how you should feel," he said after a moment. "But I do think you've convinced yourself that this —" he gestured vaguely at the space between us, the room itself, maybe my entire existence, "— is just how things are. That nothing can change."

I crossed my arms, looking away. "And?"

"And that's not true."

I scoffed, softer this time. "Sure. Doesn't feel that way."

"You ever heard of cognitive distortions?"

I frowned. "No."

He nodded toward the infographic pinned to the wall. *Your thoughts aren't always facts*, it declared in cheery lettering — the kind of thing you'd expect on a discount-store mug.

I almost laughed. *Thanks, wall. Very profound.*

"Your brain has patterns," Dr. Dyer continued. "If those patterns are built on self-doubt and hopelessness, it's going to feel impossible to see things any other way."

"Yeah, well." I let out a bitter little breath. "Hard to 'challenge' something that's been on repeat for years."

"I'm not saying it's easy." His tone softened. "But let me ask you something — if you woke up tomorrow and, for some reason, that heaviness wasn't there, what would you do?"

I blinked at him. "What?"

"If you didn't feel weighed down by all of this," he said, gesturing again, "what would you do?"

A small, humorless laugh escaped me. "I don't know. Probably take a nap."

Dr. Dyer chuckled lightly. "Fair answer." Then, a little more seriously, "What about after that?"

I hesitated. No words came. I hadn't let myself imagine a version of me that wasn't drowning.

His gaze stayed steady — not demanding, but patient. "That's what I mean when I say your brain has patterns. It's been stuck in survival mode for so long that the idea of anything else feels unrealistic. But that doesn't mean it is."

I swallowed, shifting slightly in my chair. "And what am I supposed to do with that?"

"We start small," he said. "One step at a time. You don't have to believe things can change right now. You just have to consider the possibility."

I stared at the corner lamp. Its glow wasn't harsh, wasn't overwhelming. Just... steady.

Consider the possibility.

I wasn't sure I could. But maybe... maybe I could try.

Dr. Dyer's fingers tapped lightly on the armrest. His eyes stayed on me — steady and unhurried, like he was waiting for something to click.

"You know," he said, his voice calm, "your brain does something interesting. It holds onto your mistakes, replays them, like a bad habit."

A dry breath left my lungs, almost a laugh. "Yeah, I noticed."

The corner of his mouth twitched faintly. "But habits can be unlearned."

I didn't respond right away. My eyes drifted toward the bookshelf, where *Mind Over Mood* sat next to *The Body Keeps the Score*. I wondered if either had some magic answer I hadn't thought of yet. Or if they'd tell me the same thing I already knew, but couldn't seem to fix.

Dr. Dyer didn't rush me.

I let out a slow breath, rubbing the back of my neck. "And how exactly do you unlearn a habit that's been there your whole life?"

Dr. Dyer tilted his head slightly. "First, you recognize it's a habit."

I let out a soft scoff. "Right. Because that's the hard part."

"More than you think," he said calmly. "You've spent years believing your brain is just telling you the truth. When it dredges up something embarrassing from middle school, it thinks it's giving you useful information."

My gaze landed on the mindfulness poster near the door. One line caught my attention: *Thoughts are not commands. They're*

suggestions. I huffed quietly. *Yeah, sure. Try telling my brain that at 3 a.m.*

"I don't know if my brain thinks it's useful," I said finally. "It just... does it."

Dr. Dyer nodded. "And what if you stopped assuming your brain was right all the time?"

I blinked at him. "What?"

He rested his elbows on the armrest, fingers laced together. "What if your brain isn't reminding you of these moments because they matter? What if it's just... stuck?"

I sat with that for a moment, rolling the thought around like a loose marble.

He went on. "Think of it like a scratched record. The needle keeps hitting the same groove, playing the same part over and over."

My eyes flicked to the stress ball on his desk. I remembered picking it up earlier, but never squeezing it. My fingers twitched, like they wanted to try again. "So what you're saying is I just need to shake the record player?"

Dr. Dyer huffed a quiet laugh. "Something like that. You need to disrupt the pattern. When your brain pulls up a memory, you don't have to engage with it."

I leaned back, arms crossing over my chest. "That sounds like some therapy nonsense."

"Maybe," he said, one corner of his mouth twitching faintly. "But therapy nonsense works sometimes."

I smirked despite myself.

Dr. Dyer settled back, gaze steady on me. "Look, Samuel. You've trained your brain to be really good at holding onto the bad stuff. That doesn't mean it's permanent. It just means it's a habit. And habits can be changed."

I let the words settle — heavy but not suffocating. I wasn't sure I believed him. But I didn't disbelieve him either.

"And when the thoughts about not being here show up," he added gently, "those are habits too. Not prophecies."

My throat tightened slightly.

"They don't get to decide for you," he said. "You do."

I stared at the lamp again — the steady glow. For once, the idea didn't feel like an accusation. Just... a possibility.

"...Maybe," I said finally, voice quieter than I meant it to be.

Dr. Dyer nodded, as if that was enough for today.

My eyes dropped to the packet of therapy resources he'd given me weeks ago. I still hadn't opened it. Maybe I would. Maybe I wouldn't.

But I didn't feel like walking into traffic anymore. That was something.

I exhaled, feeling the weight in my chest shift — not gone, but not as sharp.

Maybe, for the first time, I didn't have to believe everything my brain told me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Week 12 of LEAP

The migraines came back. I fucking hate them.

Not the dull, predictable kind I'd learned to manage with ibuprofen and dim lighting. These were different. They showed up like an uninvited guest who'd brought all their luggage and had no intention of leaving. Pounding at the edges of my skull like fists against a locked door, tightening with each pulse until the world shrank to a single, throbbing point behind my eyes.

They always came when something inside me snapped. I just hadn't connected that yet.

I showed up at Sanctuary anyway. Didn't have a choice. Bills don't care about your personal crisis, and the thought of sitting alone in my apartment with nothing but the echo of everything I'd lost made my skin itch.

The morning light hit me the moment I stepped through the doors, and I winced hard enough that Ruth noticed from across the room.

Overhead lights hummed too loudly, stabbing white-hot into my skull. Every beep of the register, every shuffle of feet, shattered in my head like broken glass. I kept my jaw clenched, breathing through my nose in slow, deliberate pulls—the kind of breathing you do when you're trying not to scream in public.

The email had come the evening before. Sterile subject line: Termination of Employment. A cold paragraph citing "violation of contractual terms." As if the ten minutes in Director Holt's office—the security escort, the pink slip pressed into my hands, the walk out past every window where people could watch—hadn't been

enough. They needed it in writing, too. Bureaucratic cruelty, neatly packaged in twelve-point font.

At that point, I still thought it was procedural. Administrative. Random.

I didn't know yet how deliberate it had been.

I'd find out later that LEAP and STAND were connected through a sponsorship clause buried in paperwork no one reads. Their debate rival, still bitter, still looking for any way to gut Neil, had found his weapon. One phone call to invoke the breach, and I became the easiest target. The board was happy to use it. They'd been hearing whispers about me anyway — late nights, trouble outside class. None of it violated LEAP rules directly, but it made it convenient when someone pushed.

I made it through the first two hours on autopilot. Stocked shelves. Rang up customers. Smiled when someone asked if I was having a good day. My face did the thing it always does — assembled the correct expression like muscle memory, while everything behind it quietly fell apart.

Ruth found me first. She took one look at my face and didn't ask questions; she just grabbed my arm and steered me to the back room with the kind of calm authority that made you do what she said without a second thought.

"Sit," she said, pulling out a folding chair.

I sat.

Carmen appeared moments later with a glass of water and a sleeve of crackers, setting them down in front of me like I was a kid home sick from school. "Migraine?"

I nodded. Speaking felt impossible. My throat was tight in a way that had nothing to do with the pain in my head.

Carmen studied me for a second longer than she usually would, then squeezed my shoulder once and left without another word. Ruth lingered, arms crossed, watching me with that expression she wore when she was deciding whether to push or let it go.

She let it go for now.

That's when Ralph came in.

He didn't say anything at first. Just stood in the doorway, solid as always, filling the frame without crowding it. Those calm eyes — the ones that somehow made everything feel less catastrophic just by looking at you — settled on me and stayed.

"Go home, Samuel," he said finally.

My throat tightened. "I'm so sorry, Ralph. I —"

"Don't." He cut through my apology before it could gather momentum. His voice wasn't sharp. Just firm. The way you'd stop someone from stepping off a curb without looking. "Just go. Rest. We'll figure it out."

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Nothing came.

Halfway to the bathroom, my body gave out.

I made it to the sink barely and gripped the edges of the basin as everything I'd been holding back came up at once. Not just food. Something deeper. Something that had been building since the moment Director Holt slid that pink slip across his desk and said, "We're done here."

When it was over, I stayed hunched over the sink, forehead pressed against the cool porcelain, breathing in shuddering pulls. The fluorescent light buzzed overhead. Someone's phone rang out in the store. The world kept moving.

That was the part that got me. The world didn't pause.

I washed my face. Rinsed my mouth. Looked at myself in the small mirror above the sink — pale, hollow-eyed, jaw tight.

Ralph was waiting outside the bathroom door. He didn't mention what had happened. Just handed me my jacket and walked me to the exit like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Call me tonight," he said at the door. Not a suggestion.

"Okay."

He nodded once. And that was it.

The walk home took longer than it should have. My feet moved, but my brain had disconnected from the process entirely, operating on some autopilot program that kept me upright and pointed in the right direction while the rest of me tried to process the shape of a life that no longer made sense.

LEAP was gone. The plan I'd spent months building — the structure, the steps, the thing that had given me a reason to get up every morning — was gone. And the people who'd taken it had done so without losing a wink of sleep over it.

What now?

How do you keep moving when the game is wired against you?

The evening air was cool against my face. Somewhere down the block, a dog barked. A kid on a bicycle rang their bell at no one in particular.

I didn't have an answer. Not yet.

But I kept walking.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Week 12 of LEAP

I thought about going home first, but I didn't.

The apartment felt like a trap lately. Four walls and too much quiet. Too much space for thoughts to echo.

At the corner, I stopped walking without meaning to. No plan. Just a pull. Why not go back to the one place I'd run to the last time I felt this low?

Emerald Square.

I'd been coming here since before CREC. Back when the city was still new, and every street felt like it might be the one that changed everything. Emerald Square wasn't a square at all, just a narrow stretch of green wedged between two apartment complexes, barely wide enough for a bench and a footpath. But it had a bridge. A small rusted arch over a drainage channel that only turned into a real stream after heavy rain. And underneath it, the world went quiet.

That's where I ended up. Sitting on the concrete ledge beneath the bridge, legs dangling, watching the water catch the last of the evening light. The weed softened the edges of everything. Not enough to disappear. Just enough to look without flinching.

The graffiti under the bridge was different from what I remembered. Someone had painted "Pay Your Dealer" in thick block letters, little devil horns drawn onto the D. Below that, "LOVE IS DEAD" in dripping red. A pigeon had, at some point, pooped directly on the exclamation mark.

I almost laughed.

Almost.

This was the story I'd been avoiding. The one I didn't say out loud. The one I pretended didn't count because I was still here.

The thoughts that usually claw at you in the quiet — the ones that show up uninvited and refuse to leave — they were still there. But they'd lost some of their teeth. They felt less like accusations and more like old photographs. Things I could look at without the whole room shaking.

So I looked.

I've tried to kill myself two and a half times.

Maybe it's only two. I don't know if the half counts. I've turned it over enough times in my head that the number doesn't matter as much as the fact that I tried. More than once. That's the part that's harder to sit with.

The half attempt was at my last high school party. I was in the pool, shirt still on because I never took my shirt off in front of people back then, feeling invisible among kids who seemed certain of their futures. College plans. Road trips. Big dreams built on foundations I couldn't see.

Me? Empty. Not angry-empty. Just hollow. Like someone had scooped out whatever was supposed to be there and left the shell.

I thought: what if I just... stayed under?

It wasn't dramatic. No internal monologue. No cinematic swell of music. I just stopped fighting. Let the water fold over my head and stay down.

My lungs burned sooner than I expected. My body screamed at me to surface. Every cell in me was built to survive, and it knew what was happening even if my brain had checked out.

But a voice whispered: just a little longer.

I don't know how long I stayed down. Long enough that someone grabbed my arm and yanked me up, laughing.

"Dude, you almost beat the record!"

Apparently, I'd joined a breath-holding contest happening on the other side of the pool.

I won five bucks.

I never told anyone it wasn't a game.

I sat with that for a while, under the bridge. My brain wanted to analyze it — catalogue it, label it, build a neat narrative around it. But for once, I let it just... exist.

The second attempt came later. Before Neil. Before Sanctuary. In a crappy apartment where the walls closed in daily and the silence pressed against your eardrums.

I won't detail the method.

I'll just say my body revolted. Survival instinct overrode intent. Every nerve ending in me screamed no, and I listened — not out of courage, but reflex. I ended up with a shallow cut on the back of my neck and the humiliating realization that even in this, I couldn't follow through.

That was the part I carried. Not the pain. The failure.

The third attempt — the real one, the one that still visits me in quiet moments — happened at Emerald Square.

Not today.

That was during CREC, back when I still believed hard work could save me.

Back then, I actually wanted to live. I really did. That's why I signed up for CREC.

CREC — Community Resource and Employment Center — was smaller than LEAP, less polished, but it had teeth. They placed you in jobs, trained you, and gave you structure. If you showed up and did the work, they promised something real on the other side.

I showed up. I did the work.

The assignments piled up fast. Shifts ran long — eight hours, sometimes twelve, depending on what the placement needed. I didn't complain. I was grateful. Grateful that someone had looked at my résumé and thought, yeah, this one's worth a shot.

So I pushed. Every shift. Every task. I gave it everything I had because I was terrified of what would happen if I didn't.

That's when the burnout hit.

It didn't announce itself. It seeped in slowly, like water through a crack you didn't know was there. At first, it was just tiredness. Normal tiredness. The kind you shake off with coffee and willpower.

Then it was something heavier.

The kind that makes the idea of disappearing feel practical.

I started missing assignments. Not because I didn't care, but because I physically couldn't drag myself out of bed some mornings.

My body had hit a wall I didn't see coming.

My manager at the placement noticed before I did. She pulled me aside one afternoon — kind about it, not accusatory — and said, "You're a hard worker, but I can see it in your eyes. You're burning out."

She was right. I just didn't know what to do about it.

The collapse happened in the stockroom on a Thursday. I was carrying boxes — not heavy ones, just awkward — and my legs buckled. Not metaphorically. They actually gave up. I ended up on the floor between the shelves, boxes scattered around me, and I couldn't get back up. Not because of the weight. Because everything in me had simply... stopped.

I sat there for maybe ten minutes. Maybe longer. I don't remember crying. I don't remember deciding to sit down. I just was.

The stockroom was quiet. Dust caught the light from a single overhead bulb. A broken shipping label fluttered near the floor. And I just sat there, surrounded by boxes I was supposed to be moving, waiting for something — anything — to tell me what to do next.

Nothing did.

Neil was my emergency contact at CREC. I'd put him down because the form required one, and he was the only person I could think of who would actually pick up the phone.

He did. Every time.

That's the thing about Neil. He picks up. Doesn't matter what time it is, doesn't matter if he's in the middle of something. The phone rings, and he answers.

When I called him that night, I couldn't explain what was happening. The words wouldn't line up into anything coherent. I just said I was tired.

He said he'd get me.

He did.

But the tiredness didn't go away. It settled in. Made itself comfortable. Started changing the shape of everything around it.

The apartment felt smaller. The walls seemed to lean inward at night, the ceiling a little lower each morning. The days stretched in a way that wasn't about hours or minutes but about weight — how much energy it took to move from one to the next.

I kept showing up at CREC. Kept doing the shifts. My brain had a subroutine for that — a low-level program that kept me functional even when everything underneath it was running on fumes.

I wrote the business plan they asked for. Attended the meetings. Filled out the forms. But I was doing it from somewhere far away, like watching myself through glass.

The business plan was the part I actually enjoyed. Gummies. Health-focused. Boutique-style. The kind of thing that looked clean on a shelf, came in interesting flavors, and felt like it belonged to someone who had a future.

I spent more time on it than I should have, tweaking branding, imagining packaging, running numbers I barely understood. It was the closest I came to feeling real.

But futures require energy.

And mine was running out.

One evening, after another shift I barely made it through, I found myself at Emerald Square.

The bridge was the same as always. Rusted. Quiet. The kind of place where the city's noise dropped to a murmur, and you could hear the water moving underneath — a low, constant sound, like something breathing in its sleep.

I stood on it for a while. Not thinking. Not planning. Just standing, hands resting on the railing, looking down at the water below.

It wasn't deep. Maybe four feet. Enough to drown in if you didn't fight. Not enough if you did.

The streetlight behind me cast a cone of amber, turning the surface into something almost gold. Everything beyond that circle was dark: the trees, the footpath, the apartment buildings rising in the distance with scattered lit windows. Someone up there was living their life. Cooking dinner. Watching TV. Arguing about something that would seem small by morning.

And I was down here, on a bridge over four feet of water, trying to decide whether any of it was worth the effort of getting back to.

I let my weight lean forward.

Just a little.

Just enough to feel the shift — the way gravity changes when your center of balance tips past recovery. The railing pressed into my palms. The water caught the streetlight, turning it into something

almost beautiful. A mirror reflecting a world that looked easier from a distance.

Just a little more.

The thought was quiet. Not dramatic. Not a voice screaming at me to jump. Just a gentle suggestion — the kind your brain makes when it's exhausted and out of alternatives.

What if you just... stopped?

Stopped trying. Stopped fighting. Stopped waking up every morning to do it all again.

It would be easy.

That was the dangerous part — not the act itself, but the relief in imagining a world where you didn't have to carry anything anymore.

Something instinctive — maybe something deeper — jerked me back.

My hands tightened around the railing until my knuckles went white. My heart slammed against my ribs, sudden and violent, like it had been caught off guard and was scrambling to compensate. My breath came in sharp pulls, each one burning.

I stayed there for a long time afterward. Not because I wanted to try again. Because I was shaking too hard to move — my legs felt unreliable, still holding me up, but only because they were choosing to, moment by moment.

The river moved underneath me. Indifferent. Steady. It didn't care whether I stayed or went. It just kept flowing.

I chose to leave.

That's when my phone buzzed.

Neil.

Hey. You alive?

The glow of the screen cut through the dark like a small, stubborn light.

Yeah, I typed back, just at the square.

Stay there. I'm on my way.

I pocketed the phone and looked out at the water one more time.

The current kept moving — slowly, steadily, indifferent to everything above it.

I stayed.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Week 12 of LEAP

Neil arrived, sinking beside me, his concern hanging like an unspoken question.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice careful but steady.

I kept my eyes down, staring at nothing, feeling the weight of everything pressing into my chest.

“I don’t know... just a lot happening and I’m buzzing right now.”

Neil set the duffel bag at his feet and let out a long sigh.

“I heard what happened from Ralph. Sorry about that.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, voice barely above a whisper. “I’m still stressed. I threw up again, and worse, it happened at Sanctuary.”

Heat prickled behind my eyes as I pressed my palms against my face. “God, I can’t believe I did that to Ralph.”

Neil nudged my shoulder, his hand resting there a moment, solid, wordless.

“Dumbass. Ralph already forgave you. He knows you’re going through it.”

He unzipped the duffel and pulled out a small box, opening it with a flourish that felt almost comedic, an intentional break in the heaviness.

“Here. Nepalese space cakes. Straight from Amsterdam. I originally got these for when you won the Champion Initiative, but... well, now feels like the right time.”

The cake looked handmade, brown, marbled with green and amber swirls like moss and honey caught mid-dance. Its aroma drifted up, warm and spiced pine, cinnamon, citrus layered over that unmistakable grassy undertone.

I picked it up and bit in. Dense. Chewy. Earthy bitterness beneath sweetness. Nutmeg is hiding in the back of it.

Neil had already finished his, grinning like someone strapped into a rollercoaster just before the drop.

“Yeah,” he said with a satisfied nod.

I swallowed hard.

“Being blacklisted... what does that even mean?”

“I honestly don't know. That's just what they called it when they kicked you from the program.”

“Yeah. They handed me a pink slip and had security escort me out. God, this sucks.”

Neil shrugged, expression softening.

“Well, at least Sanctuary's still got your back. Ralph doesn't care about their blacklist.”

“You're probably right,” I murmured. “Still feels like I'm dragging everyone down.”

“Then stop dragging and start climbing,” Neil said. “You're not a burden. You've got people here.”

A faint rustle behind us made Neil glance up. Eve approached, pulling her hair into a loose knot, catering uniform creased from a long shift.

“You two,” she said, eyebrows lifting as she caught the herbal sweetness lingering in the air. “Seriously?”

Neil flashed her an unapologetic grin. “He needed it.”

Eve frowned. “You said you'd hold off.”

“I know,” Neil admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “But tonight felt like the right time.”

Eve sighed and sat beside me, concern tucked under irritation.

“Samuel, you're baked, aren't you?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but stopped.

My fingertips tingled lightly and electrically. The world softened at the edges. The air felt warmer—not temperature-warm, but color-warm, like everything had been brushed with a thin coat of gold.

And then above the rooftops, just past the line of trees, I saw it.

A pale arc.

Thin. Curved. Suspended.

Not a full ring. Just a fragment of one, stretching across the sky like someone had drawn a slow, deliberate stroke and forgotten to finish it.

I blinked.

It stayed.

There it was.

The sign.

The world I only ever saw when I was high enough to stop fighting it.

A planet like this one—close enough to feel familiar—but with that ring hovering in the distance. Not overhead. Not dominating the sky. Just there. Watching.

The bench beneath me seemed to inhale and exhale, subtly syncing with my breathing. Somewhere in my head, I found that hilarious, me and a park bench sharing lungs.

“You okay?” Eve asked again, softer this time.

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Just... noticing things.”

In the distance beyond the trees, somewhere between the rooftops and the arc, I thought I saw movement.

A figure.

Small at first.

An astronaut in a bulky suit, visor catching light that didn't exist here. He walked slowly, deliberately, across that other landscape. Not toward me. Just moving.

Neil was saying something about Ralph and paperwork, about appealing the blacklist. His words drifted in and out like radio static.

The astronaut bent down.

Picked up a rock.

Turned it in his gloved hands, examining it as it mattered.

Eve fidgeted beside me. “You're not answering questions in full sentences. That's usually a sign.”

“I’m answering internally,” I said.

Neil snorted.

The astronaut lifted his arm and tossed the rock upward.

It didn’t fall.

It stretched thin into a streak of light and shot across the sky.

A shooting star.

I swallowed.

Okay. Yeah. Definitely hit.

“You two smell like Amsterdam exploded back here,” Eve said flatly, tugging at the knot of her apron. “Space cakes, right?”

The astronaut was already bending again, collecting another stone.

Neil raised his hands in mock surrender, a guilty grin spreading across his face.

“Guilty. He needed it.”

I let out a weak laugh, my body somehow heavier and lighter at once, like gravity had temporarily misplaced its assignment. The trees beyond the path shimmered faintly. For a second, I could swear they were humming, each leaf vibrating like it was trying to remember how to be a leaf. My brain filed the thought away automatically, for some imaginary essay I’d never write.

Eve shook her head, though her lips twitched like she was fighting a smile.

“You don’t need to worry about the blacklisting,” she said after a beat, voice softening. “LEAP handled it wrong, and Ralph’s already taking care of it.”

I winced. The memory still burned.

“I vomited at Sanctuary.”

Neil and Eve exchanged a look.

“We know,” Neil said gently. “And Ralph isn’t mad.”

“But I’m mad at myself,” I admitted.

Eve placed a hand on my shoulder. Even through the haze, the pressure felt really anchored.

“Then forgive yourself. Ralph already has. He even called you brave for trying.”

I closed my eyes for a second.

The ring still hung in the distance.

The astronaut had moved closer, not toward me, just more visible. He walked slowly across that other landscape, boots pressing into dust that wasn’t really there. He bent again, lifting another small stone.

It glowed faintly in his hand.

He examined it.

Then tossed it upward.

Another streak split the sky.

I exhaled a small, startled laugh as my eyes opened.

“I must be really high,” I said. “Because I can see you all very clearly.”

Neil raised an eyebrow. “That’s reassuring.”

For a second, I half-expected their faces to ripple like bad animation. My brain even started running the physics of it. Would their voices stretch too? Or just their outlines?

They didn’t.

Eve stayed solid.

“Why don’t you open up more?” she asked quietly. “Talk about what’s really going on?”

My fingers curled in my lap.

“I’m just overwhelmed. And yeah, the cake’s definitely kicking in.”

“You don’t have to go through this alone.”

I shook my head slightly.

“No. That’s not—”

I swallowed.

“I am trying. I really am.”

Neil’s demeanor changed. Eve didn’t move her hand.

“But sometimes it just... gets to be too much.”

In the distance, the astronaut stooped once more, lifting another stone from the dust.

“And when it gets to be too much, giving up starts to look easier than it should.”

Silence settled between us.

Eve's voice came carefully. "Giving up how?"

My jaw tightened. "Like... ending it before it gets worse. Before it reaches whatever the point of no return is."

The stone in the astronaut's hand hovered, unmoving.

"That scares me," I continued, quieter now. "Because I do want to live. I genuinely do. I know things can get better. I know that. But knowing something and feeling it are two completely different things."

The astronaut tossed the stone. A thin streak of light cut across the sky.

"Most of the time, I can't feel it. Most of the time, it's just this weight. And this quiet voice that says, why not just end it before it gets worse?"

No one interrupted.

I rubbed my palms together. "And I don't even know how to explain it. I want to get it right. I want to say it perfectly. But half the time I barely understand it myself."

Neil leaned closer. "You don't have to say it perfectly."

I let out a breath that felt like it had been waiting months.

"If I tell one person, it spreads. And then suddenly everyone knows. And the ones who know look at my problems and decide they're small. That I'm just complaining. That I don't have a real reason."

My eyes dropped to the pavement.

“So what’s the point?”

The astronaut reached down once more and lifted a final stone.

“I want to live,” I said.

My throat tightened.

“I don’t want to live.”

A beat.

“I want to live.”

The astronaut slowly rose from the ground, boots lifting as if gravity had loosened its grip.

“I have things that should make me happy. I know I do. But happiness feels like it’s happening behind glass. As I can see it, I just can’t get to it.”

Eve’s hand tightened slightly on my shoulder.

“And I don’t even have a clean reason why.”

My voice thinned.

“I just... don’t always know.”

Halfway into the air, the astronaut extended his arm and placed the final stone into the darkness. It didn’t explode or flare. It simply remained there, steady — a small, pale point of light.

“But I do want to live,” I added, almost desperate now. “I have to keep saying that. Things can get better. They have to.”

Ralph’s voice surfaced in memory, firm and grounded. Just try your best, Samuel. That’s all anyone can ask.

The small point of light brightened gradually, rounding out into something fuller, holding its shape like a fragile moon suspended against the ring. The astronaut hovered for a moment as if inspecting it, then continued upward, growing smaller until he was only a silhouette against the dark. The ring and the moon remained steady. The rest of the world seemed to hush around them. A soft wash of light – moonlight or whatever my brain translated it into – brushed faintly across everything.

For the first time in days, something loosened in my chest.

“Thank you,” I said softly, voice carrying just enough. “I really appreciate it.”

Neil leaned closer, that familiar grin tugging at his lips. “Good,” he murmured. “Because you’re stuck with us.”

I laughed – real laughter this time, not forced. Neil joined in, and then Eve, the sound small, human, almost sacred against the quiet night. The ring remained in the distance, the moon steady, and for the first time in a long while, I didn’t feel like I was falling.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Week 12 of LEAP

Walking back into LEAP felt like visiting the scene of a crime I'd been accused of committing.

Except this time, I had proof of my innocence.

Nicole called on a Tuesday.

I was at Sanctuary, restocking the back shelf of herbal teas, the ones that smelled like someone's grandmother's medicine cabinet, when my phone buzzed. I almost didn't answer. Numbers I didn't recognize had become a kind of background noise over the past few months, and I'd developed a policy of ignoring anything that wasn't Neil, Ralph, or one of the others.

But something made me pick up.

“Samuel? It's Nicole. Ralph's friend.” Her voice was brisk, professional, the kind of tone that got straight to the point and didn't waste syllables. “I have news on your case. Can you come in tomorrow?”

I said yes before I fully registered what she was asking.

Nicole's office was small and cluttered, suggesting she was actually doing work rather than just performing it. Legal files are stacked on the desk. A mug of cold coffee beside her keyboard. A framed certificate on the wall that I couldn't read from where I was sitting.

She was sharp mid-forties, dark hair pulled back, reading glasses perched on her head like she kept forgetting they were there. She

shook my hand with the kind of grip that said she'd dealt with people who didn't want to be dealt with, and had won.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to the chair across from her desk.

I sat. My hands were doing the thing, fidgeting, gripping my knees, releasing, gripping again. My brain was running simulations in the background: *best-case, worst-case, most-likely case*. None of them came out clean.

“Here's where we are,” Nicole said, pulling a folder from the stack. “LEAP's legal team reached out last week. They want to settle.”

I blinked. “Settle?”

“It means they're not going to fight this in court.” She leaned back slightly, watching me with the same calm that Ralph had, steady and unhurried. “Which means they know they're on the wrong side of this.”

My brain took a second to catch up. “They're admitting they fired me unfairly?”

“Not in those words,” Nicole said. “They'll never say that publicly. But the settlement terms make it clear.” She tapped the folder. “They're offering compensation. Financial. For the wrongful termination.”

The word *compensation* sat in the air between us, heavier than it should have been.

“How much?” I asked, then immediately felt strange for asking. Like putting a number on what had happened to me was somehow reductive.

Nicole told me. And for a moment, the room went very quiet.

She drove me to LEAP the next day.

I didn't ask why she offered. Maybe she could tell I wouldn't have gotten there on my own. The building looked the same from the outside—same glass doors, the same corporate lobby with the motivational banners that had always felt like they were trying too hard.

But walking back through those doors felt like entering a different atmosphere entirely.

The air was thicker.

My heartbeat was louder.

Security clearance took three minutes. A young guy at the front desk nodded at someone I didn't recognize, checked my ID, made a phone call, and waved me through without making eye contact.

I wondered if he knew what had happened here.

If anyone had told him.

Nicole walked beside me, one step back, letting me set the pace. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to.

The study room Nicole had arranged was on the second floor, one of the small, windowless rooms where LEAP students used to work on assignments. I'd spent hundreds of hours in rooms like this one. Late nights, group projects, exam prep sessions that stretched past midnight.

The fluorescent lights buzzed the same way.

The chairs were the same uncomfortable plastic.

The whiteboard on the wall still had a faint ghost of a marker drawing someone hadn't fully erased, which looked like a stick figure holding a flag.

I sat down and stared at it for a while.

I'd spent hours here. Late nights studying for exams, I aced. Group projects where I actually contributed. All that work logged, measured, and validated. And they'd erased it with one phone call.

Nicole excused herself to get paperwork from the front office. "I'll be back in ten," she said. "Just wait here."

So, I waited.

The vending machine in the hallway outside the study room was the old kind, the one that required you to shake it gently if your chips got stuck. I went and got a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips. Ate them slowly, one at a time, not tasting any of them. The crunch was loud in the quiet hallway. Someone's footsteps echoed from the floor above. A door closed somewhere.

I thought about the last time I'd been in this building. The Director's office. Holt's face was not angry, just... done with me like I was a problem that had been solved. The pink slip. The walk out, past the windows, past the other students who might or might not have noticed.

I swallowed another chip. It tasted like nothing.

That's when Mr. Drake appeared in the doorway.

I almost didn't recognize him at first. He looked tired, more tired than I remembered. The kind of tired that comes from carrying something you can't put down. His clothes were pressed, but his

eyes weren't; they had that slightly unfocused quality of someone running on caffeine and obligation.

“Samuel,” he said. Not a question.

“Mr. Drake.”

He stepped into the room and sat down across from me, setting a manila folder on the table between us. He didn't open it right away. Just sat there, hands folded, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read, somewhere between regret and something else. Guilt, maybe. Or the closest thing to it that someone in his position could afford.

Mr. Drake had been my advisor during LEAP. Not the kind who just signed off on paperwork and disappeared, but the kind who actually showed up. Who checked in? Who asked how things were going and listened to the answer. I'd seen him at a few of the program events, always on the periphery, always watching the students as if he were keeping track of something.

“I wanted to talk to you before the settlement goes through,” he said.

I waited.

He exhaled slowly. “The termination wasn't entirely fair.”

The words hung in the room. Simple. Direct. The kind of thing you'd expect someone to say, but hearing it, actually hearing it, from someone who'd been on the inside, landed differently than I'd imagined.

“Some of the higher-ups on the funding board pushed back after your name came up in a meeting,” he continued, his voice measured, like he was choosing each word carefully. “There were

whispers. Rumors about your life outside the program, late nights, working at a dispensary, trouble. None of it was a violation. But it made you visible. And when the contract clause got invoked, the board had a convenient reason to act on it.”

I stared at the folder on the table. “So, they wanted someone to make an example of.”

“Yes.” He said it plainly. No excuse. No spin.

“And you knew?” I asked. My voice came out quieter than I meant it to.

Mr. Drake met my eyes. “I heard about it after the decision was made. I tried to push back. It wasn't enough.”

The silence that followed was the kind that fills a room when there's nothing left to say that hasn't already been said. I turned the empty chip bag over in my hands just for something to do, something to hold.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked finally.

He was quiet for a moment. Then: “Because you deserved better. And because someone in this building should have said that to you a long time ago.”

I didn't know what to do with that. It sat in my chest like a stone not heavy enough to crush me, but solid enough that I couldn't ignore it.

Nicole came back with the folder. She set it on the table next to Mr. Drake's two manila envelopes, side by side, like chapters of the same story ending at the same time.

“Ready?” she asked.

I looked at the settlement documents. The check was inside, I could see the corner of it, white and crisp, sticking out from the fold. Nicole had told me the amount yesterday, but seeing it here, in this room, in this building, made it real in a way that a phone conversation hadn't.

The number was significant. More than I'd made in three months at LEAP. Enough to cover rent for months if I were careful. But it didn't feel like winning. It felt like compensation for something stolen that money couldn't replace.

“Yeah,” I said. “Ready.”

I signed where Nicole pointed. She initialed where she needed to. Mr. Drake watched, silent, hands folded on the table.

When it was done, Nicole slid the check across to me. “For your pain and suffering,” she said, with a small, professional smile that was warmer than it had any right to be. “It's the least they could do.”

I looked at the amount. My hand shook just slightly, just enough that I noticed.

“Wow,” I said. And then, quieter: “I wasn't expecting... this.”

Nicole nodded. “You earned it.”

I tucked the check into the folder without looking at it again. Mr. Drake stood and extended his hand. I shook it. His grip was firm, deliberate, and he said, “Good luck, Samuel. I mean that.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He left. Nicole gathered the rest of the paperwork, slid it into her briefcase with the efficiency of someone who'd done this a hundred

times. Then she looked at me, really looked, and said, “Take your time.”

So I did.

I sat in that study room for another ten minutes after she left. Looking at the ghost of the stick figure on the whiteboard. Listening to the hum of the fluorescent light. Thinking about all the hours I'd spent in rooms like this working, trying, believing that effort was enough.

Then I stood up, picked up the folder, and walked out.

The lobby looked the same. The glass doors opened the same way. The afternoon sun hit me the same way it always had.

But I walked through them differently.

That evening, I looked at the check again. It sat on my kitchen counter, next to old bills and a half-eaten bagel. The number hadn't changed, but my relationship to it had.

I could pay off debt. Cover rent for months. Maybe even save some, actually save, not just “what's left after expenses” saving.

For the first time since the firing, I could breathe without calculating how many days until I ran out.

The chapter had closed. And I was ready to turn the page.

Chapter Forty

Spring—

The paycheck arrived on a Friday.

Not a big one. Not the kind that changes your life or pays off old debts in one shot. Just a regular, honest paycheck for hours worked, at a job I actually showed up to every day without dreading it.

I stared at the number longer than necessary.

Not because it was impressive.

Because it didn't scare me.

Carmen spotted it first.

“Oh, you got paid!” she said, snatching the stub from the counter before I could even pick it up. She held it up like evidence in a trial, squinting at the numbers. “That comma ain't imaginary, Samuel.”

“Give it back,” I said, but I was already smiling.

Ruth appeared from the back, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She glanced at the stub in Carmen's hand, then at me, and her manner changed subtly, the kind of thing you'd miss if you weren't looking. Pride, maybe. Or satisfaction. The quiet kind.

“That's something,” Ruth said.

It was more than something. I just didn't know how to say that out loud.

Carmen was already planning how to celebrate. “We need pizza. The good kind. Stuffed crust. No arguments.”

“Carmen, it's a paycheck, not a lottery ticket,” I said.

“It's a *Friday* paycheck,” she corrected, as if that made it fundamentally different. “What else are you gonna do with it? Save it?” She said the word *save* like it was a mild insult. “Live a little. Get fancy socks. A lava lamp. Or maybe a fish tank with fake jellyfish.”

Ruth shook her head, but she was smiling too.

The breakroom at Sanctuary was the kind of space that felt like someone had actually thought about the people who'd be spending time there. The couches didn't stab your spine. The lighting was warm, not the aggressive fluorescent that made everything look slightly ill. Lo-fi beats whispered from a ceiling speaker that Ralph had installed one afternoon without announcing it to anyone. There was a faint whiff of herbal tea that never quite faded, no matter how many hours passed.

I sat in the corner of the couch with a mug of something Ruth had made, chamomile, I think, or maybe one of her custom blends that tasted like a garden in autumn, and let the afternoon just... exist.

It was the strangest feeling. Not happiness, exactly. Something quieter than that. Something closer to the absence of dread.

I thought about how weird it felt not to hate where I was. For months, maybe every job had felt like something to survive. A place I showed up because I had to, not because I wanted to. Sanctuary was different. Not because the work was glamorous or the pay was life-changing. But because the people here saw me.

Not as a number, not as a problem to solve, but as someone who belonged.

This was the first time a job had given something back.

Neil texted around four. A photo of a stuffed bear he'd found at a thrift store, orange, with one button eye slightly larger than the other, captioned simply: *Mascot candidate?*

I laughed out loud. Ruth looked up from behind the counter with a raised eyebrow, but didn't ask.

Absolutely, I typed back. *He looks like he's seen some things.*

That's why he's perfect, Neil replied.

Eve sent a follow-up, a photo of cookies she'd baked, shaped like bats, with little icing faces that ranged from serene to existentially distressed. "For the record," she wrote, "the angry one is you."

I saved both photos without thinking.

I thought about texting Ellie too, but didn't. We'd exchanged a few messages since the firing, her checking in, me saying I was fine, her sending photos of bat-shaped cookies with existential crises as captions. But the easy rhythm we'd had was gone. The kiss still hung between us, unspoken. Warner's shadow still lingered somewhere in the background, a presence I didn't fully understand. And maybe that was okay. Some connections needed distance before they could breathe again. Not every relationship has to be resolved to matter.

This was around the time I stopped bracing for impact.

Not because I trusted the ground beneath me, but because I'd learned I could stand back up if it cracked.

Later that evening, I sat on my apartment's small balcony, more of a ledge, really, barely wide enough for a chair, and scrolled through my phone. No messages. No notifications worth reading. Just the quiet hum of the city doing its thing below me.

I opened the Photos app. Scrolled past recent shots, mostly food Carmen had sent me, a sunset I'd taken on a whim, walking home, until I hit the older ones. Sanctuary in the early days. The breakroom before Ralph hung the speaker. Ruth laughing at something off-camera, mouth wide open, caught mid-story.

I found the “Left and Right” doc in my notes app a weird brain-hemisphere dialogue I'd started in a creative writing class years ago. Two columns: things my left brain said versus things my right brain said. Most of it was nonsense. But one entry caught my eye:

Left: You don't deserve this. Right: You're still here.

I stared at it for a while.

A moth bumped against the streetlamp below my balcony once, twice, persistent and stupid and alive. Somewhere down the block, a man was cursing at a parking machine. A group of teenagers was arguing about anime villains with the intensity of a UN summit. A boy on the sidewalk was drinking a juice box, staring at nothing, perfectly content.

Life just kept happening, whether I took notes or not.

I closed the app, set my phone down, and leaned back in the chair. The sky above the city was that particular shade of orange-grey that meant the sun had gone, but the light hadn't fully left. Somewhere, a dog barked once, sharp, definitive, and then went quiet.

I didn't know what came next. College courses, maybe. More training with Ralph. Therapy sessions I hadn't decided on yet. The future was a sketch, not a blueprint.

But for the first time, that didn't terrify me.

Chapter Forty-One

Present Day—

I stepped into Dr. Dyer's office without pausing, no hesitation, no deep breath to steel myself. Just walked in, the way you walk into a room you've been to a hundred times before. The door closed behind me with its usual soft click, and I sat down in the chair across from him like it was muscle memory. Which, by now, it was.

“Last session,” Dr. Dyer said, looking up from his notes. “How are we feeling about that?”

I considered the question. Turned it over like I was looking for the trick in it, the way I used to, back when every question felt like a test I hadn't studied for.

“Weird,” I said finally.

He acted like that was exactly the answer he'd expected. “Weird how?”

I shifted in the chair, not uncomfortable, just thinking. “Like... I don't know. It's not scary anymore. That's new.” I paused. “But it's not nothing, either.”

“That sounds about right,” he said.

The first time I'd sat in this office and agreed to try therapy, it had been framed as an experiment. Half sessions. Low commitment. Just enough to see if it was worth continuing.

Somewhere along the way, it stopped feeling like an experiment.

Dr. Dyer leaned back slightly, letting the silence settle the way he always did, not empty, not heavy, just present. A space for things to surface if they wanted to.

“You showed up,” he said after a moment.

It wasn't a compliment. It was an observation stated simply, the way you might note that the sky was blue or that Tuesday followed Monday. But it landed differently than I expected. Not because it was surprising. Because it was true. And for a long time, I hadn't been able to say that about myself.

“Yeah,” I said. “I did.”

“That's not nothing.”

I looked at the bookshelf behind his shoulder, the same titles I'd been eyeing since my first session. *The Body Keeps the Score*. *Mind Over Mood*. *The Feeling Good Handbook*. I'd actually read one of them now, not all the way through, but enough to know it wasn't as useless as I'd assumed. Small victories.

“There's one more thing we haven't talked about,” Dr. Dyer said quietly.

I tensed just slightly, just enough that I noticed my own fingers tighten on the armrest.

“What?” I asked. My voice came out more guarded than I intended.

“Emerald Square,” he said. “The bridge.”

The room went still. Not literally; the diffuser still hummed, the clock on the wall still ticked, and it was as if the temperature had fallen a degree or two.

I'd told him about the ideation. The passive thoughts. They *wouldn't care if a car hit me*, hypotheticals. But I'd never mentioned the actual attempts. Not in detail. Not fully.

“How did you know?” I asked quietly.

He glanced at his notes. “You mentioned it in passing. Session 16. You said you'd been there before' but you didn't elaborate.” He looked back at me, steady. “I didn't push then. But this is our last required session, and I think it's worth naming.”

I exhaled slowly. My hands were doing the thing again, gripping, releasing, gripping. I looked down at them, watched my fingers move like they were operating independently of the rest of me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I've been there.”

Dr. Dyer didn't react the way I'd braced for: no alarm, no flux in posture, no pokerface. He just stayed where he was, present and unhurried, and let the words exist in the room.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

I considered it. Turned the question over the way I'd turned over so many others in this office, looking for the angle, the trap, the hidden expectation.

There wasn't one.

“Maybe,” I said. “Not today. But... maybe.”

“When you're ready,” he said. And he meant it. I could tell not from his tone, which was the same calm it always was, but from the way he moved on without pressing. Like the door was open, and he was content to let me walk through whenever I chose.

He picked up a manila folder from his desk, the same one he'd been holding since I walked in, and set it on the table between us.

“Options,” he said simply.

I looked at the folder. It wasn't thick, maybe ten pages, stapled together. A list of therapists in the area, with different specialties, different styles. Some took insurance. Some didn't. Some were closer. Some had longer wait lists.

“These are therapists I'd recommend,” Dr. Dyer said. “If you decide to continue.”

“And if I don't?”

He tilted his head slightly. “Then you don't.” No judgment. No disappointment. Just a simple acknowledgment that the choice was mine.

I picked up the folder and turned it over in my hands. It felt lighter than I expected, lighter than the decision it represented. I thought about putting it down. Thought about saying something deflective, something that would keep the whole thing at arm's length the way I'd done for months.

But I didn't.

“I'll think about it,” I said instead.

Dr. Dyer smiled, not wide, not dramatic, just the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth that said he understood exactly what that meant coming from me.

“That's all I ask,” he said.

We sat in silence for a while after that. Not awkward. Not heavy. The kind of silence that happens when two people have spent

enough time together that they don't need to fill every gap with words. The diffuser hummed its faint lavender. The clock ticked.

“You know,” Dr. Dyer said eventually, “you came in here today without hesitating.”

I blinked. “Yeah. I noticed that.”

“Six months ago, you'd pause at the door. Sometimes for a full minute.” The corner of his mouth twitched again. “I used to time it.”

I laughed a short, surprised sound. “You timed me?”

“Occupational curiosity,” he said, deadpan.

I shook my head, smiling despite myself.

Dr. Dyer leaned forward slightly, elbows on his knees. “Do you want to keep going?”

The question hung in the air, not heavy, not loaded, just honest.

“I'm not sure,” I said. And for once, I didn't feel guilty about it.

“That's okay,” he said. “You don't have to be sure. You just have to be open to it.”

I looked at the folder again. The list of names. The possibilities.

“Just try your best,” Dr. Dyer said. “That's all anyone can do.”

I nodded.

“And one more thing.” He paused, choosing his words with the same care he always did. “Be as kind to yourself as you are to the people you care about. You deserve that too.”

It landed quietly. Not like a revelation. More like something I already knew but had never quite let myself believe.

“Okay,” I said.

He stood. Extended his hand. I shook it firm, deliberate, the way you shake someone's hand when you mean it.

“Take care of yourself, Samuel.”

I looked at him, this man who'd sat in a room with me for months, who'd let silence do the work when words would have been easier, who'd never once told me I was broken or needed fixing and felt something I couldn't quite name. Gratitude was close, but not quite right. It was more like... recognition. Of someone who'd done what he said he would.

“...You too,” I said.

And I meant it.

I stepped outside the medical plaza where Dr. Dyer's office was—the same parking lot, the same cars glinting in the afternoon sun. The sky stretched wide above me, clear and cloudless. Deep blue at the top, fading to a soft pastel near the horizon. The kind of sky that doesn't ask anything of you. It just is.

I held the folder against my chest. Not tight, not desperate. Just there. I stood for a moment, breathing.

Then I started walking. This time, I didn't rush.

Chapter Forty-Two

Present Day—

After the settlement, the space cakes, the therapy sessions, all of it, and here we are.

First, this took me a while to put together. Longer than I thought it would. Writing things down is different from saying them out loud, which is different from just carrying them around in your head like stones in your pockets. Dr. Dyer told me in our last session that the real work happens outside his office. He was right. Therapy gave me the tools. This is putting it all down so I can see the shape of it; that's part of using them.

So yeah... this memoir? This whole thing, I've been putting together everything I've told Dr. Dyer and everything I haven't. I know why I made it.

But I'll get to that.

Updates, in no particular order:

STAND is still out there, doing what STAND does. Their propaganda has gotten more polished since I last checked their sleek website, carefully worded mission statements, and neatly referenced footnotes on everything, like a nonprofit that learned PR from a textbook and followed it religiously. I don't lose sleep over them. Not anymore.

LEAP itself has gone quiet. The program still technically exists, I checked, out of morbid curiosity, but it feels like one of those things that's running on inertia rather than purpose. Indecisive. Directionless. I almost felt sorry for it. Almost.

Chastity, Brown, and Journee were just people who happened to be in the story at the same time I was. We did projects together. Sat in the same rooms. Said things that probably felt important at the time. I don't really know how they're doing now. We were all just trying to get through something. Sometimes that's all people are when they pass through your life: witnesses to a chapter, not the whole book.

Neil had his birthday on October 31. Of course he did. Halloween. We leaned into it. He insisted we go as zombies. Not subtle ones, either full theatrical commitment. Torn clothes. Fake blood. The kind that stains your fingernails for days. We showed up at the amusement park looking like we'd crawled out of a low-budget apocalypse movie. He rode the same roller coaster three times in a row while still in zombie makeup, cotton candy the size of his head in one hand. He bought a stuffed orange bear from one of the game booths. One button eye slightly larger than the other. He named it Gerald. Gerald now lives on his dashboard like a very supportive undead co-pilot.

Eve's birthday was the week after. Carmen organized karaoke, the kind of place where the lighting is bad enough that you can pretend you don't look ridiculous. I sang. Badly. Spectacularly badly. Eve recorded it. I have asked her to delete it. She has not.

Carmen and Ruth found a new place, a two-bedroom near Sanctuary, close enough that Carmen can walk to work and Ruth can still make it in time for her morning routine. They sent me a photo of the kitchen. It has a window that actually lets in sunlight. Ruth wrote underneath: *First apartment where the light comes in.* I saved the photo.

Ralph is thriving. He's on a medication he hates, the kind that works but makes him feel slightly less like himself, he says, but he's taking it, which matters. He's been training me in some of the management side of Sanctuary. Not formally. He just started including me in conversations and letting me watch him handle things, and one day I realized I was learning without being told. Classic Ralph.

Ellie. I still keep in touch with Ellie from time to time. She's doing her photography gigs, still bouncing between assignments, sometimes vanishing into weeks of editing, sometimes showing up with stories that make me laugh. We never talked about the kiss. Maybe we never will. Warner's still part of her story in ways I don't fully understand, and I'm okay not knowing all the details. We're in touch. We care about each other. And maybe that's enough for two people in different orbits who still check in. Not every connection needs a label.

Aaron texted last month that he got into grad school. Marcus is working tech support somewhere and seems genuinely happy about it, which amazes me more than it probably should. We're not close anymore. The kind of closeness we had during LEAP doesn't survive the thing that was holding it together. But I'm glad they made it out with something to show for it.

I've been browsing online college courses too—again. This time feels different. Not like I'm chasing validation. Not like I have to earn my right to exist by collecting credentials. Just... curious. Maybe that's progress.

Ralph is training me in management at Sanctuary. It's slower than I expected, not because I'm not learning, but because Ralph doesn't believe in rushing anything. He has a saying: “The best managers

don't have all the answers. They just know where to find them.”
I'm working on believing that about myself.

Therapy is in a strange place. The trial period is over. Dr. Dyer gave me options: a folder full of therapists, with different specialties and approaches, and told me the choice was mine. I haven't decided on a frequency yet. Monthly, maybe. Biweekly, if I'm feeling ambitious, but I keep the folder. I didn't throw it away. And that feels like enough for now.

So yeah... this memoir? I know why I made it.

It's for people entering my life to give them a sense of who I am before they have to figure it out on their own. It's for the ones re-entering, so they'll understand what's changed and why. And it's for me. For when I'm old and gray and the details start to blur, so I can look back and see the whole shape of it, not just the fragments I've been carrying around for years.

When I'm old and gray, at the end of it all, I'll read all these again. And I'll remember. Not just the bad parts, the good ones too. The ones that made it worth staying for.

A letter. To the guy who didn't know if he'd make it:

Hey.

Remember when everything felt impossible? When the plan you'd spent months building fell apart in ten minutes, and you sat in that office wondering how you were supposed to keep breathing after that?

Remember standing on that bridge? The water below, the weight pressing down, the voice that whispered it would be easier to let go? You stepped back. You held on. And not just once, every time

it got that bad, some part of you chose to stay. That wasn't a weakness. That wasn't luck. That was the quietest kind of bravery, and you did it over and over without anyone seeing.

You held on. Somehow, you held on.

Not because you were strong in the way people talk about strength, not the dramatic, inspiring kind. Just the stubborn, unglamorous kind. The kind that shows up to work when everything hurts. The kind that lets someone hand you a glass of water without refusing it. The kind that says *okay, one more day*, when one more day feels like the hardest thing in the world.

And here you are.

You're not done yet.

The vaporizer sat at the ready on the table beside me. It swelled with warm vapor, doing its quiet mechanical breathing while I finished the thought.

I watched it fill for a moment before lifting the mouthpiece.

The first pull was slow. Warm, smooth. Nothing like the harsh burn of smoke—just a gentle heat that spread outward through my chest and settled behind the eyes like a dimmer switch lowering the brightness of the world.

Fitting, somehow.

For the first time all night, I actually used the thing they'd given me.

Not ceremonially breaking it in as I'd joked about. Not pizza boxes scattered across a better apartment floor after some triumphant second paycheck.

Just this.

A motel chair. Half-empty soda bottles. The quiet after laughter.

Another slow pull.

I closed my eyes as the vapor disappeared into my lungs.

Funny how life works.

You make promises about when things will finally start. You imagine the perfect moment—clean, symbolic, earned. A better apartment. A better version of yourself. A moment when everything lines up, and you say, “Now.”

But most of the time, life doesn't wait for the ceremony.

Most of the time, it just hands you the moment anyway.

And maybe that was the point.

I've got people now, real ones, the kind who show up when it counts. I've got a job that doesn't make you disappear. I've got a therapist's folder in my drawer and a moon I saw in a hallucination that somehow meant more than anything anyone ever said to me with words.

Sam, you're not fixed. You're not “better” in the way people mean when they say it. You're just... here. Moving. Breathing. Trying.

And that's always been enough.

From the Author

I've always dreamed of making a living as a creative writer, crafting stories that resonate with readers and pouring my heart into every word. This book is a promise to myself: the first step toward turning that dream into reality, even after I accidentally deleted the original manuscript and had to start over.

Written on a tight budget with limited resources, this story is about struggle, resilience, and the quiet courage it takes to keep moving forward. I hope Samuel's fights reflect some of your own. I hope you close this book with a renewed resolve to live life on your own terms, not despite the obstacles, but because of what they've taught you.

Most of all, I want to thank those who believed in me and helped bring this story to life. You've made this milestone possible, and I'll never forget it.

